ADEQUATE REASON$^1$

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Abstract. Optional or noncompelling reasons are reasons that do not require action, even in the absence of strong enough opposing reasons to defeat them, though they are adequate to justify action and to motivate a rational agent who accepts them. To allow for such reasons is to limit defensible versions of internalism applicable to reasons. This paper outlines two interconnected ways of allowing for them and hence allowing for a gap between a rational agent's recognition of a reason and motivation by it. First, without deviating much from standard accounts of reasons, we can appeal to second-order "exclusionary" reasons for discounting the motivational force of certain reasons. However, in order to account for cases, we need to make these exclusionary reasons optional as well. Secondly, though, we can interpret practical reasons as offering or answering criticism and allow for some reasons in favor of action that answer criticism without implying significant criticism of alternatives. First-order reasons that are "purely positive" in this sense will be subject to discounting without appeal to further reasons. As applied to second-order reasons, the notion of a purely positive reason can allow for discounting by appeal to exclusionary permissions, construed as entitlements based on nonstringent ideals.

1. Questioning Rational Compulsion

There is an assumption common in metaethics and the study of practical rationality that a reason that is recognized as such by a rational agent necessarily motivates her. Unless it is countered by stronger or equally strong opposing reasons, she has to act on it. I call this the assumption of "rational compulsion."

The idea that reasons compel – compel obedience, or at any rate practical attention – is appealing. In light of it, a rational agent who fails to take moral considerations seriously would seem to be someone who accepts no moral reasons, not just someone who ignores those she accepts. Recognizing a consideration as a reason bearing on one's own case seems to entail being motivated by it to some extent, and an unopposed or conclusive reason (one that defeats all opposing reasons) presumably would prompt an agent to act, on pain of irrationality. So if an amoralist can be said to acknowledge the truth of moral judgments, she must fail to recognize them as yielding reasons, or at any rate as reasons applicable to herself.

In fact, the notion of a "sufficient" reason might suggest that rationality requires action on such reasons just as a matter of logic.2 Sufficiency in a logical sense entails necessity: if p is sufficient for q, then q is a necessary condition of p. So in some sense – not, of course, causal – p
necessitates q: an act is required by sufficient reason for it.

However, in her work on Aristotle's practical syllogism, Anscombe notes that the idea of necessitation often gets wrongly applied to practical reasoning as a way of explaining the sense in which the conclusion of a practical inference follows from the premises.\(^3\) Aristotle himself provides examples of non-necessitating reasons: conclusions identifying an immediately available act as one means to a certain end (for instance, health), without any claim that it is a necessary means, or even the best available. For further examples of a more abstract sort, consider the decision to do something now on the basis of the recognition that someone ought to do it, or that one ought to do it oneself at some point, but without a reason that would pick out oneself as the agent, or the present moment as the time when the act must be done. Those are simply features of the acts that are ready to hand.

There is a familiar enough sense in which one's reasons for action in such cases are "sufficient," though it should not be confused with the logical sense of sufficiency, since it does not imply requirement. One's reasons are enough here to justify the choice of action, but not to pick out a specific action as irrational to omit. We might mark this off as a notion of "adequate" reason, to distinguish it from the logical notion of sufficiency.

There are other examples, however, that might seem to go further than cases of multiple ways of satisfying a reason. Consider being told that a certain, very undemanding action would lengthen one's life by a short period – a day or two, or perhaps just a moment – in the remote future.\(^4\) Even if there is no other way of achieving the same result, it makes perfect sense to say "Who cares?" But I do not think rationality requires that response either. We have a choice, not just between alternative ways of acting on such a reason, but also about whether to take it seriously enough to act on it at all.

Shelly Kagan speaks of the kind of rationally optional consideration that I have in mind as a "noninsistent" reason.\(^5\) The notion comes up as a challenge to his own view, an extreme version of utilitarianism, but Kagan insists that the challenge has no force without a full-blown theory of
noninsistent reasons. I shall eventually propose a general conception of practical reasons, what I call "the critical conception," that helps explain some of the cases I have in mind. But I think we can also make reasonable progress within existing theories, if we let go of the logical notion of sufficiency and are content with reasons adequate to justify and to motivate action.

T. M. Scanlon's recent account of reasons suggests a notion of adequate reasons at one point, though it does not clearly move beyond cases of the disjunctive structure that featured in Anscombe's discussion: cases where any of several alternative acts would do well enough as ways of satisfying a certain reason. I think we can push the point further, however, by moving to the level of second-order reasons, as Scanlon does himself in dealing with other questions.

In defense of this move one would naturally turn to Joseph Raz's work on reasons. Raz in recent work defends optional reasons – but without reference to the idea from his earlier work that I would bring to bear on this issue, his notion of "exclusionary" reasons. These are second-order reasons for excluding certain first-order reasons from consideration. Perhaps some first-order reasons, such as reasons to do what would add a few moments to a long life, might be said to fall below the threshold of seriousness, or outside the range of concerns, that an agent is entitled to set for himself. However, Raz's own later account of optional reasons focuses on incommensurability, which would seem to limit it, in effect, to further sorts of disjunctive cases: cases where there is no victor among competing reasons, since they cannot be ranked against each other.

A recent move toward extending Raz's account can be found in Michael Bratman's defense of "framework" reasons as including "self-governing policies," general policies of discounting or “bracketing” certain reasons. But I think this also stands in need of modification to give an adequate account of the full range of cases. I shall eventually outline a critical conception of practical reasons that will push the notion of optional reasons a bit further – adding what I think is a preferable general account to current attempts by some other recent authors to assign a lesser kind of normative force to optional reasons.

Although my argument will therefore turn on issues of normativity, I have set it up in
motivational terms, as addressing questions about the kind of hold that awareness of practical reasons is supposed to have on us.\textsuperscript{11} I shall turn back to motivational issues at the end of this paper, since what I call the assumption of rational compulsion may be seen as a version of a view discussed in the current literature under the heading of "reasons internalism." Importantly, though, this is not the version most widely associated with the term, as formulated by Bernard Williams, which takes status as a reason to rest on connection with the agent's motivation.\textsuperscript{12} Rational compulsion means that any reason a rational agent recognizes as such must motivate him, but compatibly with this a rational agent might be thought to have reasons besides those he recognizes that are unconnected to any of his current motives. Though I shall also take issue with Williams's internalism below, what I mean to be questioning in the first instance, under the heading of "rational compulsion," comes closer to another version of internalism often thought of as Kantian, in contrast to Williams’s Humean version.\textsuperscript{13} This view holds only that a reason must motivate a rational agent if he is aware of it. However, there are so many distinguishable views that go by the name "internalism" in the contemporary literature – even within ethics, and even as applied to reasons – that I prefer not to frame my central argument in these terms. I shall attempt to sort out some of the relevant versions of internalism in closing, and to take a further look at the figure of the amoralist, whose possibility is called into question by a version that applies more directly to reason judgments.

Despite allowing for optional reasons, and in common with Kantian internalism, I do want to retain the possibility of using reasons to account for binding moral requirements. The notion of a reason is important to metaethics insofar as it affords a way of grounding moral requirements on fairly minimal metaphysical assumptions – no more than we need in order to make sense of nonmoral talk about rational action. But I also think that some ways of appealing to reasons – or to rationality, or Reason – are overblown. By deflating them, I hope to make progress toward pinning down a subclass of rationally compelling reasons, most notably moral reasons. However, my central argument here will be framed in terms of nonmoral cases.
2. **Optionality and Second-Order Reasons**

In cases of minor health benefit and the like, I seem to have the option of setting my threshold of sensitivity to the relevant sort of reason at different levels. We once heard, for instance, that "red dye #7" in jello and other foods carried a slight risk of cancer. I was inclined to dismiss such considerations as not worth the trouble it would take to read my food ingredients, though I could make perfect rational sense of someone who saw things differently, possibly including myself at a later time. My view of what was worth the trouble was more in the nature of a decision concerning how to live at a certain stage than an assessment of the independently determined strength of the relevant reasons. However, with enough reasons of the same sort – cancer risks from food ingredients – I could no longer see my decision here as rational. My threshold of concern (and that of any rational person) would have been exceeded.

Besides the sorts of relatively trivial reasons that might add up to a requirement, however, there seem to be whole classes of considerations to which I might be personally indifferent – and have a right to be, rationally speaking – though I can see how they motivate rational agents, possibly including myself at other life-stages. Power and control come to mind as nontrivial considerations that I do not think I assign any weight to in my own life, except as needed to promote some other aim (including fending off others who assign them too much weight). Or consider the financial incentives that some of my older colleagues were offered recently to retire – characterized by one colleague as making it irrational for them not to retire. Money beyond a reasonable level – assuming, perhaps contrary-to-fact, that they were at one – might not motivate me, as a rational agent, though of course it would give me a reason for action in the sense of making action to gain that benefit rationally intelligible. It is a reason that could motivate me if I let it; but I can also shrug it off, compatibly with rationality.

At this point, before going further with meatier cases of the sort just illustrated, I want to use an especially simple-minded case to bring out a distinction: between awareness or recognition of a practical reason and practical sensitivity or responsiveness to it, the tendency to be motivated by
It is important that my cases of indifference to a reason are not meant to involve a failure to appreciate it in the former sense, of reason recognition. Rather, they involve the sort of gap between recognition and motivation that I want to make out as rational – in the sense of rationally permissible, not required.

Consider a child's game of "Got you last!" One child taps the other, and it is incumbent on the other to tap him back. Or so say the informal rules of this game, along with the typical feelings of the players: a compulsion to avoid being "one-down" in tapping drives repeated rounds. The game terminates (at least for the moment) when a player is unable to get his tap in – or finally manages to walk away from the game.

Now, what might the latter, walking away from the game, entail? There are a number of distinguishable possibilities, only one of which corresponds to what I have in mind, which involves just dropping the compulsion to tap back by taking the reason to do so as motivationally "noninsistent," a reason that a rational agent may just turn down.

First, something might happen to distract one or both players from continuing the game; something else comes up, and they move on. Perhaps it is time for their favorite television show. Essentially, this involves a change in the agent's reasons, or in his recognition of the reasons, bearing on the choice of what to do. That is not what I have in mind.

Another possibility is that a player recalculates the strength of the reasons he already recognizes. Suppose he decides that the game is foolish, and that being tapped gives him only a silly or weak reason for tapping back. This would be a change in his comparative assessment of his reasons. But it still is at the level of reason recognition.

What I have in mind in the noninsistent reasons cases is something else: suppose a player just decides not to continue playing the game, but not because he has found something else to do or has decided that the game was foolish in the first place. There need not be a change in the reasons he recognizes or in his assessment of his reasons as such. He still sees being tapped as a reason for tapping back – he does not regard his previous participation in the game (or the option he now has
of participating further) as irrational, or even silly – but he has dropped any need to respond to a tap. This would be a change in motivation rather than reason recognition, and I think it is a distinct (and rationally permissible) possibility.

One might be inclined to invoke second-order insistent reasons to explain the change: perhaps resisting further involvement in the game is seen by the agent as a necessary strategy in some larger interpersonal competition; he is "one-up" in a more important sense by refusing to play. There is also a range of more obvious sorts of opposing first-order reasons we might appeal to, in this case as in others, such as the effort it takes to continue playing. But without independent evidence of a shift in the agent's assessment of his reasons, these look like all-too-easy moves to save a standard picture. On the alternative picture I propose, there need not be insistent reasons at either level.

The standard picture of practical reasons makes out rational weight or strength as something available for the agent to recognize in or about his reasons, rather than something he assigns to them. My simpleminded case is not meant to convince anyone to modify this picture but if anything exhibits the oddity of departing from it. Something seems to be left unexplained that we want to invoke reasons to explain: why the agent ignores what he sees as a reason. If the agent is rational, he ought to have grounds for that as well.

He may, but they need not be independent of his decision. The agent in these cases can be seen as appealing to an exclusionary reason: that the considerations in question fall below a certain threshold of importance (as with "red dye #7" and other cases of slight health risk) or that they do not fit into a chosen mode of life (as with inducements to power, retirement incentives, and the like).

What would it mean, then, to say that an excluded reason, a reason the agent turns down, still counts as adequate reason to do something, if it lacks motivational or practical force? An adequate reason is simply one that needs nothing further in order to justify action – and hence to motivate a rational agent. It needs no supplementation by further reasons, that is – as opposed to background causal factors that might be required to explain action fully (even if we take reasons as the salient
causes), or to account for the full motivational force of the reason. I think this is what current authors mean, or at any rate what they have a right to mean, by "sufficient," but it removes the suggestion that any agent who fails to be at all motivated by recognizing a reason must be irrational.

Note that the higher-order reasons that come into my suggested account of why one might ignore an adequate reason are invoked only in the case where the agent does decide to ignore one. He needs no further reasons in order to act on one, by definition of "adequate." As considerations regarding his threshold of responsiveness to reasons, the higher-order reasons are not “opposing” reasons in the usual sense: same-level reasons, of determinate strength antecedent to choice, that count on the other side. What distinguishes the case where the agent decides to ignore a first-order reason is not what other first-order reasons he had but which of the available first-order reasons he decided to act on.

This does not mean that all reasons depend on the agent's decision, but just that some do. My argument here follows current authors in working from an "objective" notion of reasons as considerations pertaining to the world, there to be recognized by the agent, whether or not he does recognize them, as counting for or against some practical option. That one has made a certain decision may be taken as such a fact, but there will be general rational (as well as moral) constraints on what an agent may decide.

I cannot simply cancel the force of something I see as a requirement for achieving my central aims in life, or those of any reasonable human life, including health considerations I take to be serious, and still count as rational – though of course there are various reasons why I might postpone or avoid attending to them. On the other side, if there really are health risks so distant or insignificant or unrelated that even in combination they are not worth forming general habits to avoid, I should reject the idea of a life spent fussing over them. Here we do have insistent or compelling second-order reasons.

*Raz’s Account*

In his own account of noncompelling or optional reasons, Raz defends a general conception
of reasons as rendering an option eligible for choice, or an act intelligible, rather than requiring action. Raz limits optional reasons to cases of incommensurability, where none of a set of competing reasons is “conclusive” in the sense of defeating all the others and thus concluding deliberation. But given his view of incommensurability as pervasive, he does not regard this as a major limitation. Typically, his cases involve "apples-and-oranges" choices between options whose value is incommensurable, such as going skiing versus reading Proust next weekend. However, he at one point introduces a different sort of case to show that we could conceivably have incommensurable reasons without incommensurable value: there would be nothing irrational about deciding to see a certain movie just because it had better photography, even if one were able to rank all the relevant aspects of available movies and conclude that another movie was better overall.

I shall continue to use Raz's terminology in what follows, but on the understanding that it applies only to normative relations among same-level reasons, without implications for their motivational force and without application across levels. We can think of a second-order reason for discounting a first-order reason as "trumping" it motivationally rather than defeating it as a reason. Since first- and second-order reasons are therefore not really in competition with each other, I shall also assume that the definition of incommensurability in terms of undefeated “competing” reasons restricts it to reasons at the same level.

If Raz's “apples-and-oranges” cases were the only cases of noncompelling reasons, we could save the assumption of rational compulsion by limiting it to conclusive or uncontested reasons. If a rational agent does not act on a reason, there must be some undefeated competing reason in play. But consider my options in response to an appeal made by an administrator at one point to the possibility of attaining power in the University as a reason for faculty to serve on more committees. I might grant that power and scholarly productivity are incommensurable in general terms, meaning that one could not plot all degrees of each of them on a single comparative scale. But in excluding considerations of power from my deliberations about what to do next term, I need not make that judgment about the particular case at hand. I clearly value scholarly productivity above political
power, both in general terms and in the degrees I am likely to achieve, and on that basis can turn down the appeal. Yet assuming I have no objection to attaining a bit of power, my values may also leave me the option of succumbing to the appeal.

Would I have to go after political power if I had no competing priorities? That is, would I be committed by rationality to pursuing this option if I recognized a reason for it and no weightier, equally weighty, or incommensurable competing reason? It might seem so, just because my reason for assigning power considerations no significant weight in this case – my second-order exclusionary reason – might seem to be based on the need to avoid distraction from academic projects, so it depends on the presence of first-order competition.

In fact, both sorts of cases, as I set them up, the cases of trivial health benefits and the nontrivial cases such as that appealing to power motivation, would naturally be taken as turning on competing priorities – perhaps just something general, and universally available as a reason, on the order of avoiding effort. However, in some variants of the trivial benefits case such as the case of cancer risk from food ingredients, I think it is important that we also have a reference to a bad state of affairs, as a reason that counts against just doing nothing. A purely positive reason, understood as a consideration that counts in favor of something but implies no significant criticism of alternatives – the sort of incentive (all carrot, no stick) that the administrator in the power case wanted to be seen as offering faculty – might not be enough to move a rational agent off the dime. This would undercut the assumption of rational compulsion even in application to conclusive reasons.

I might rationally just decline to do something that would simply enhance my well-being, that is, as in the earlier case of extending my life by a day in the remote future. Or consider the offer of a "designer drug" that fills no real need I am aware of: I am already in a perfectly acceptable mood, say, but use of a certain mood-elevating drug would make me even cheerier. I have adequate reason for taking it, then, but I can also quite rationally turn it down. Similarly, in the power case, I might just ignore an inducement to enhancing what we may suppose is a perfectly acceptable
current level of power, though I do have the time for committee service and can spend only so much
of my free time productively on research. Competing reasons, such as the fact that committee
service takes time and effort, will of course be available here as elsewhere, and I might appeal to
them as excuses, but I need not appeal to them to justify in rational terms my option of turning the
inducement down.

So an adequate reason that fails to motivate a rational agent need not be seen as
incommensurable with some other first-order reason. In recent work on Raz's account Michael
Bratman offers an alternative explanation of adequate reasons that appeals to higher-order policies
we have of discounting or “bracketing” certain reasons. Second-order reasons might be conceived
in these terms, but if so they would also seem to pick out only some of the relevant cases. My
choice to forgo a designer drug or administrative power may sometimes be limited to a particular
occasion. It need not express my commitment to a self-ideal requiring further decisions consistent
with that one – even acknowledging Bratman's point that switching around too much, even on trivial
matters, would undermine the coordinative stability that rationality is meant to provide.

Often in making such choices I am effectively deciding what sort of person I want to be, as
Bratman says. But I can change my mind, compatibly with rationality, as long as I put a limit on
how many times I change it. I can occasionally act on considerations I would not want to take into
account systematically – if someone else should happen to read me food ingredients containing red
dye #7, say. Fully optional reasons seem to involve rational permissibility (rather than requirement),
then, all the way up.

To accommodate more "open" policies, we might try something weaker at the higher level
than reasons prohibiting attention to certain first-order reasons. In at least some possible variants
of my central cases the higher-order decision may just be to permit oneself to discount such
considerations – at will, that is, without the kind of policy that would tell us when we must discount.
The term "exclusionary" also applies to permissions in Raz’s scheme: second-order entitlements
to exclude certain first-order reasons from consideration. In fact, some of my remarks just above
about positive versus negative reasons suggest another, more radical way of counting some reasons as optional that will yield exclusionary permissions when applied to second-order reasons.

3. Purely Positive Reasons

My central argument thus far suggests a picture of practical reasons with rational requirements at the top, considerations too trivial to bother with at the bottom (or off the chart), and in between a diverse set of optional reasons that afford a justification for but do not rationally require action. Like most of the literature on reasons, this is set up in terms of positive reasons, considerations in favor of something. However, I think the normative spotlight really should be on negative reasons, as considerations counting against something, ruling or tending to rule it out.

On what I call the critical conception of practical reasons, the function of a negative reason is to offer criticism of an act or other option, making it out as in some way defective or problematic. We might think of a negative reason as a "disqualifying" reason, since it tends to render an option ineligible for choice – to negate Raz's characterization of positive reasons as rendering an option eligible. By contrast, the normative function of a positive, or "qualifying," reason is just to answer potential criticism.

"Potential" is meant to cancel any suggestion that criticism actually has to be put to the agent, or even contemplated by him as likely to be put, for him to recognize a corresponding reason. As above, I am taking reasons here in an "objective" sense, applying to facts that count as reasons independently of their recognition by the agent, though recognition is a condition on their motivational force. We may have other motives for acting on a positive reason besides answering criticism, but according to the critical conception that is their only normative function considered just in themselves. They do not set a standard of correctness in decision but serve, as it were, to debunk the claims of other reasons to set one. Where they manage to defeat negative reasons, they supply entitlements or permissions.

To forestall confusion, let me note that "positive" and "negative," as applied to a reason, need not coincide with the application of the terms directly either to the option the reason is supposed to
count for or against (whether it is an act or rather an omission) or to the fact that constitutes the reason (whether it involves promoting or rather avoiding some consequence, say). Both of these may vary independently of the way the reason is supposed to bear on a given option (whether it counts for that option or rather against it), which is the distinction I have in mind. Thus, for instance, the fact that smoking causes cancer is a reason against smoking, and hence a negative reason, even though neither the option in question nor the reason is framed negatively.

Now, I take it that rationality requires an agent to avoid being subject to significant and unanswered criticism; he must discount or answer the criticism, or else act on the corresponding negative reason.21 I shall not attempt precision on what makes a criticism count as "significant," except to spell out that the corresponding negative reason cannot be seen as trivial in itself or as legitimately discountable on other grounds. Let me sum up these conditions in a word by referring to the reason as "nondiscountable" – or in positive terms, more loosely, as a "serious" reason. Defeating (as opposed to discounting) a negative reason amounts to denying it conclusive status by appeal to opposing first-order considerations, including positive reasons that answer the corresponding criticism by bringing up points in favor of the option in question. But this does not mean that a rational agent has to act on a positive reason – unless it implies some significant criticism of alternatives and hence a negative reason.

So the upshot of the critical conception is that the optional status of a purely positive reason, a reason that does not imply a significant criticism, does not depend on the competition – on what other positive reasons are in play, and hence on incommensurability. Positive reasons can force a decision only where they are taken to imply negative reasons. Purely positive reasons are optional, then, even where they are "conclusive" in the sense of answering all significant criticism of action and thereby defeating any competing negative reasons.

There are some other current authors who argue in defense of optional reasons by assigning weaker force to certain positive reasons, or to their normative relation to the options they favor.22 But despite its asymmetrical treatment of positive and negative reasons, the critical conception
seems to me to allow for a more unified account. It can accommodate our intuitions on optional reasons across a wide range of applications and without relying on a distinction between discrete types of normative force of reasons. Instead it exploits the familiar distinction between pros and cons, considerations with positive or negative relevance to an option.

As to the unity of reason generally: it might seem at first glance that the critical conception drives a wedge between practical and theoretical reasoning, since a reason in favor of belief counts as a reason against any contrary belief. However, we should be clear about taking a theoretical reason as a fact that counts, in the first instance, for or against the content of belief, a proposition, not (at least in the first instance) the belief in the sense of a disposition to assent to that content. On that construal there could also be purely positive theoretical reasons: facts that count in favor of a certain belief but not against alternatives.

It would be irrational to maintain a belief in the face of evidence against it, evidence that outweighs the evidence in favor, whereas it would not be theoretically irrational – ignoring practical reasons for making up one's mind – to withhold belief despite evidence for it that did not tend to disconfirm alternatives. In the latter case, with only positive reasons, we would have the option of believing or not, according to inclination, temperament, or commitment to some higher-order notion of the kind of epistemic agent we want to be – someone who takes things on faith, say, or a skeptic.

I grant that many of the practical reasons we express in positive form are not "purely" positive in the sense assumed here but rather are understood to imply serious negative reasons. They often amount to requirements, which I would interpret as essentially negative insofar as they rest on ruling out all alternatives to the required option. But we should be wary of applying the model of requirement to all positive reasons.

In case allowing for purely positive reasons seems to run afoul of the logic of reasons, which takes a reason for doing something as equivalent to a reason against not doing it, doing something else instead (or perhaps doing nothing), I should stress that the notion was defined just as ruling out
implication of nontrivial negative reasons, reasons offering significant criticism of alternatives. This allows us to grant that a purely positive reason implies a criticism of anything that would interfere with acting on it, but one that is insignificant in context. Consider, for instance, my choice among jackets in my closet, differing only in color. All the colors look good on me, let us assume, though green is my best color. However, there is no particular reason why I have to look my best today. So while I certainly have adequate reason for choosing the green, any criticism this implies of choosing the blue instead may be dismissed as insignificant.

I elsewhere defend the notion of a purely positive reason against a fuller set of objections – a task beyond the scope of this paper insofar as it requires discussion of the rationality of departures from maximizing. In what follows, I shall assume that such objections can be answered and instead try to indicate how the notion figures in the explanation of cases of optional reasons.

**Principled Discounting**

A defense of optional reasons in terms of second-order reasons for discounting, of the sort presented earlier, makes out discounting as "principled," insofar as it is based on further reasons rather than simply casual indifference to certain considerations. This is not meant to imply that an agent must have deliberated fully on all the relevant levels about the grounds for an everyday decision. In most cases, we as theorists have the job of spelling out second-order reasons that the agent can only allude to, if pressed to justify discounting certain first-order reasons. There just has to be such a characterization available, as something the agent implicitly recognizes, to justify discounting – except, we can now say, in cases of purely positive first-order reasons.

If we return now to the power case, how we should treat this depends on whether the first-order reason I have been offered – that committee service would enhance my power in the University – can be taken as purely positive. The administrator made a point of presenting it in positive terms, so if his remarks can be taken at face value, they allow for discounting at will, without any need to appeal to second-order reasons. Incommensurability seems to play no role in explaining this version of the case; and similarly for general policy considerations.
Handling a version of the case that involves discounting a nontrivial negative reason will be much trickier. Though incommensurability and policy considerations both may play a role in explaining when we are entitled to discount a negative reason, I think there is also a role for purely positive second-order reasons in the form of nonstringent ideals. Suppose, then, that the administrator in the power case really meant to hint at problems I might soon experience as a result of my current low level of power. If my current level is indeed subject to significant criticism, I have a nontrivial reason against failing to serve – pro tanto, of course, but let us assume that this negative reason is serious enough to defeat any competing first-order reasons in play here. My free time next term is valuable to me, for instance, but significantly less so that it would be to correct the power deficits. In that case, my reason will be optional only if I can legitimately discount it.

Now, what kinds of second-order reason might justify discounting in such a case? If we want to retain Bratman’s appeal to policies, we can understand the policy in question here as loose or open. For instance, I might adopt a policy whose content is loosely specified, such as one that just requires discounting most of the time – if I have resolved not to get too deeply involved in University politics, for instance, but have not ruled out a bit of marginal involvement. Assuming that I have been faithful enough to that resolution so far, I would be entitled to make an exception in the present instance without any particular reason to distinguish it from others.

However, we might also understand the kind of second-order reason involved here as weaker in force than a requirement. Could I be said to have a “policy” of simply allowing myself to turn down potentially distracting commitments, in the manner enjoined by the "self-help" affirmation, "I give myself permission to say no"? At any rate, this would fit the term "exclusionary permission." By itself, though, it would not seem to offer a reason in favor of discounting. Not discounting would cohere just as well with a policy of allowing myself to discount, if that is all that is in question.

So suppose I also invoke an ideal – of single-minded absorption in intellectual pursuits, say – that counts in favor of ignoring first-order reasons of the sort in question. Assuming that I am
right in regarding single-mindedness as something valuable, a decision to adhere to an ideal of single-mindedness on this occasion would seem to provide adequate reason for declining the administrator’s appeal, even though that would mean sacrificing some of my other serious interests.

We might sum up a decision to decline the appeal on these grounds as based on a higher-order decision: that it is worth it to me to put up with some significant power deficits for the sake of avoiding distraction. By hypothesis, though, I acknowledge that the long-term consequences of turning down an opportunity to achieve more power will be significantly worse than distraction. The thought is that invoking an ideal entitles me to set a higher threshold of practical responsiveness to certain reasons, at any rate within limits. Perhaps what is at issue in this case is just forgoing some in-house perks, such as preferment for terms on leave – nothing too devastating, though still nontrivial. When I decide that this is less important to me than remaining undistracted, what I am doing is pronouncing on how I will treat my two options in practical terms, not assessing their relative value antecedent to my decision.

The sort of ideal in play here amounts to a value placed on a certain way of deliberating in response to different sorts of reasons. Taking it as my standard of choice in this case need not imply significant criticism of alternative ways of deliberating. I may also grant that well-roundedness, or even single-minded political focus (at least at a certain stage of an academic career), represents an acceptable alternative ideal. Here is a place where one might insert incommensurability at the higher level, though the argument for optionality does not depend on it. The ideal need not even be seen as implying any very weighty objection to deviating from it myself, though it still provides me with a reason in favor of acts that exemplify it. In short, we can take my second-order reason in this case as itself purely positive, appealing to a nonstringent ideal: one that provides adequate but not compelling reason for discounting.

Of course, I also may be said to have a second-order reason against discounting, reflecting my first-order reason to go after power, but this is assumed to be answered by my purely positive second-order reason to ignore considerations beneath a threshold set in accordance with the ideal.
This latter reason is universal in scope, even though it is not supposed to convince anyone besides myself to assign less weight to a first-order reason to go after power; insofar as it is optional, other agents can recognize it without being motivated to act accordingly. It is put forth just as justifying my own action, and to be adequate to that task, I think it just has to be coherent (so that it can be said to provide a basis for "principled" discounting) and coherent with my past behavior (so that I can take the reason issuing from it as my reason). It need not be an ideal I have pursued consistently in the past or am likely to adhere to consistently in future, let alone one I take as self-defining.

With these or similar qualifications, we can handle the power case by appeal to the notion of a purely positive second-order reason. Importantly, this has the effect – in contrast to incommensurability or policies – of making it an intrapersonal analogue to supererogation, the case where discounting is recognized in the ethics literature. The supererogatory agent (meaning someone who performs a supererogatory act in a particular instance) is entitled to discount her own interests in favor of the interests of others, but while the latter have to be serious interests, they might clearly be less serious than those the agent sacrifices to them. Nor must she have a policy of supererogation on relevantly similar occasions, even most of the time. Instead, she might be said to be acting on an ideal of altruism that permits but does not require exclusion of self-regarding reasons. What is different in the power case is the fact that both the sacrifice made for the sake of single-mindedness and its intended benefit have to do with the agent's own interests. The assumption is that we have a certain leeway to balance different interests of our own as we see fit (perhaps above a threshold of adequate promotion of each), in much the way that the agent in Raz's movie case is entitled to stress photography above other factors in deciding which movie to see.

This yields a version of the power case in which discounting may be said to be both principled and optional at all levels: principled insofar as I do have adequate reason to discount considerations of power, but optional at all levels insofar as this does not imply a conclusive reason against attending to them. If it refers to an ideal rather than a policy, my second-order reason need not require cross-temporal consistency, even loosely construed, beyond what is needed to make
pursuit of the ideal intelligible. An element of behavioral consistency may sometimes be needed as evidence that an agent really is pursuing a stated ideal, though presumably this is less of a worry where the case involves a sacrifice in self-interest. For that matter, there also are stringent ideals, of a sort that make practical demands on an agent who accepts them – on the model of a saint committed to a life of supererogatory altruism – but though these ideals may be optional in the sense that no one need adopt them, they do not yield optional reasons.

4. *Limiting Internalism*

In cases of discounting a reason, as characterized in this paper, the agent excludes a certain first-order consideration or type of consideration from practical attention, but he does not thereby exclude it from the category of reasons. Someone might ask, though, what else there is for a practical reason to amount to, besides its practical or motivational role. There is a common conception of practical reasons that takes their essential function to be action-guidance. On the critical conception, while we still have a link between reasons and action-guidance, it depends on the need to feel justified in what we do by having a response available to significant criticism. I have taken this as a condition of practical rationality – for a somewhat different version of internalism, with limitations not built into standard versions that I now want to try to pin down.

Let me note, first, that a discounted reason still seems at least to play an indirect practical role insofar as it can resurface later as a reason for *regret* about what one decides to do now. One advantage of the critical conception, in fact, is its ability to accommodate practical reasons for regret and other attitudes other than intention. Regret is something that a rational agent who discounts a reason is also committed to discounting as inappropriate; but the motivational change that would give rise to it may be compatible with rationality, and it may be relevant to a current decision. To avoid letting regret undermine me later, I may need to rehearse and respond to the reasons for it before deciding to take action.

In the case where I resist an appeal to power motivation, someone who takes reasons as essentially action-guiding might be tempted to say that power just does not count as a reason for me.
But it would make more deliberative sense for me to acknowledge power as indeed a possible benefit of action that I might later regret not having, if I do not consider my decision carefully now. More generally, it is important in long-range planning to be able to take oneself "off-line," in a metaphor that comes up in the cognitive science literature on how we use imaginative "simulation" as a way of understanding other minds. Other minds should be taken as including one's own hypothetical future mind as it would be if one took a certain contemplated course of action. In the practical reasoning context, going "off-line" can mean reflecting on relevant considerations before deciding whether to grant them motivational influence. But the agent "has" the reasons in question, and has them now, insofar as they are available to him now as considerations he could appeal to in getting himself to perform an alternative action.

This defense of discounted reasons as still amounting to reasons is essentially an argument against "reasons internalism" in the sense of the term due to Bernard Williams. "External" reasons on Williams's conception would amount to reasons logically unconnected to the agent's present motivational system; but Williams argues that there could be no such reasons, since a reason by definition has to be the sort of thing that could come to motivate the agent to whom it applies by processes of rational deliberation. His well-known example is Owen Wingrave, a Henry James character who on Williams's account denies that the family military tradition gives him any reason to join the army. As I understand it, the reason in question here is of the sort that would yield a requirement, if Owen did not discount it. He does so, in effect, by dismissing its underlying criticism of failure to join the army as insignificant insofar as it depends on a morally suspect point of view: that of his military family.

However, I think that Owen could consistently acknowledge that has a reason to join the army – namely, to satisfy his family – but one he is entitled to discount as a factor in deliberation. He need only recognize it as something he could intelligibly act on – or later come to regret not acting on. At a minimum, all he has to do is to grant that his motivational system might change without irrationality – that he could come to care more when older, say, about the good opinion of
his family – even though he fully intends and expects to maintain his current outlook and thinks that a change would be both mistaken and repugnant. He need not be able to get to the later imagined standpoint by rational deliberative processes, if that means more than processes compatible with rationality. What matters is that the later standpoint, with its new set of concerns, would motivate regret on that basis – would support a rational argument against his earlier decision not to join the army – given facts he is aware of now. To acknowledge the intelligibility of regret in these terms is to grant that he already has a reason.

I now want to turn, though, to an earlier version of internalism in ethics. What is sometimes now called "judgment internalism," to distinguish it from Williams's version, amounts to the view that a normative judgment itself supplies some motivation for a rational agent to act accordingly – without appeal to contingent features of individual psychology, though of course these may augment or strengthen motivation. Internalism in this sense is usually applied to the moral sphere, where it is taken as ruling out the possibility of an amoralist, conceived as a rational agent who acknowledges the wrongness of certain acts but lacks any motivation to refrain from them. However, it also applies, more broadly, to the judgment that one has a reason, moral or otherwise.

We might call the resulting view "reason-judgment internalism," to disentangle it from the dispute inspired by Williams while making clear its application to reasons. It ties motivation to what I have called reason recognition, not to the mere existence of a reason, and hence might be seen as a more plausible source for the Kantian version of internalism, as stated to include a condition of agent awareness on motivation by reasons. Presumably, it is the awareness of a reason, the reason judgment, that supplies motivation, not directly the reason, on this account. The bulk of my argument here opposed this account in unlimited form but supported it in application to a subset of negative reasons: nondiscountable as well as undefeated. Where an agent does recognize an undefeated negative reason, he might still feel justified in disregarding it, either as trivial in itself or as something he is entitled to discount by appeal to second-order reasons. Otherwise, though, he would exhibit the kind of conflict in attitudes that is incompatible with rationality: acknowledging
significant unanswered criticism of an act he intends to do.

We may still be able to allow for the possibility of a certain kind of amoralist on this account, though it seems to rule out all or most real-life or readily imaginable amoralists. Someone who exempts herself from moral requirements would of course lack the sort of entitlement to discount moral or other-regarding reasons that we attribute to supererogatory agents with respect to self-regarding reasons and that I extended above to agents balancing different areas of their own interests. But what about an amoralist whose discounting is "principled," in the sense of being based on something like a Nietzschean ideal that rules out attention to moral considerations? We can grant that she is wrong in claiming entitlement to discount them, but as long as her claim is coherent – based on features, for instance, that would extend the same entitlement to others suitably endowed – behavior in accordance with it would seem to come out as rational, at least in the fairly minimal sense my argument here has assumed. She would also have to discount any regret that might be prompted by her treatment by the other agents to whom her ideal applies – which is a large, but arguably not unsatisfiable, demand. The more frequently encountered case of casual or opportunistic dismissal of moral demands, without claiming any coherent grounds for entitlement to dismiss them, is what reasons-judgment internalism on my account would rule out as irrational without further ado.

What emerges, then, is a limited but crucial exception to externalism, in several versions and applying to all but a narrowly defined class of cases. To sum up my central argument very briefly: practical reasons, even when they defeat all competitors, need not compel a rational agent who recognizes them to act accordingly. The force of a reason may be evaded by appeal to a second-order entitlement to discount it, and reasons that simply ascribe value to an option, without implying criticism of alternatives, may just be discounted at will. The view importantly still leaves room for a subclass of compelling reasons, but the subclass is picked out with reference to the agent's standing in relation to them, her lack of entitlement to discount them. So to some extent the authority of Reason depends on that of the individual agent.
1. The first draft of the first two sections of this paper was written during my sabbatical from the University of Maryland in Spring Term 2001. Later drafts of Sections 1-7 were delivered and discussed at Philosophy Department Colloquia at Washington University at St. Louis and Bowling Green State University. Let me particularly thank Michael Bratman, John Broome, David Copp, Joshua Gert, Karen Jones, Scott James, Christopher Morris, Joseph Raz, and Mark Schroeder for comments on all or part of my argument at various stages.

2. This is in contrast to the principle of "sufficient reason" in Leibniz (tracing back to medieval logic), that a reason is needed to explain any choice among options – at any rate, on the part of a perfectly rational being such as God. But some of the cases I bring up below should also make it clear that human rationality is not held to this standard.


4. The example is due to Philippa Foot (personal communication). See Foot, "Reasons for Action and Desires," in Virtues and Vices (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), for an argument to a claim of irrationality that would not work for optional reasons. Let me thank Foot for early discussion of this issue.


6. See T. M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 22-23. In his ensuing account, however, Scanlon returns to talk of sufficiency; cf., e.g., p. 34, p. 66.
7. *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 50-55. However, Scanlon's examples here are of *insistent* second-order reasons: reasons why one has to ignore certain first-order considerations (e.g. of friendship) as inappropriate in a given context (e.g. a competitive sport) rather than as prescribed by an optional decision. Scanlon's discussion also suggests that to discount a reason is to deny it the status of a reason, contrary to what I argue below.


11. This is how the notion arises in my previous work, with emotions taken as adding motivational force to the judgment that one has a reason. My present view on reasons surfaces in *Practical Guilt: Moral Dilemmas, Emotions, and Social Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 121-22, but in application specifically to motivating states. Cf. also *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988), for the defense of a noncompelling notion of emotional appropriateness.


13. In the contemporary literature the Kantian approach is distinguished from Williams’s internalism in Christine M. Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," *Journal of*
Philosophy (January 1986), 5-25.

14. In the free will literature, Fischer and Ravizza draw a distinction between "receptivity" and "reactivity" as forms of "reasons-responsiveness" that fits my intended contrast; see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, S.J., Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), e.g. p. 69.

15. Similarly for appeals to what one "felt like" doing and so forth; without independent evidence of a shift in one's attitudes, I take these just to refer to the act of choice.


18. Raz's account of optional reasons in terms of incommensurability in fact serves to reconcile the notion with a general conception of practical reasons in his earlier work that apparently has a version of rational compulsion at its core; cf. Raz's Introduction to his edited volume, Practical Reasoning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), e.g. p. 12 (cf. p. 14), where he explains a reason as "a fact which by itself is sufficient to necessitate a certain course of action, provided no other factors defeat it."


20. See Raz, Practical Reason and Norms, pp. 89-90.

21. I have attempted to state this requirement in a way that makes it minimal. "Answering" a criticism should be taken to include claiming that there is some answer without being able to produce it. I also pass over questions of interpretation that might be worth a more extended treatment, such as whether the criticism in question should be taken as including, and/or as limited to, criticism the agent would acknowledge after due reflection.

22. Jonathan Dancy defends a distinction between "enticing" and "peremptory" positive reasons, exhibiting different (evaluative versus deontic) styles of favoring an option, in his "Enticing Reasons," but he apparently limits enticing reasons to reasons appealing to the possibility of fun,


Joshua Gert’s view is similar in structure to the critical conception, but with "irrational" taken as the only relevant criticism. This excludes moral and other forms of nonprudential criticism, which the Gerts want to say can justify but never require action in the rational terms they have in mind. However, I do not want to restrict my own account in this way either. I follow Scanlon here in understanding the paradigm of irrationality in terms of conflicting attitudes, including intentions and reason judgments, so that rationality is explained in terms of reasons rather than vice versa. (See Scanlon *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 25ff; cf. also "Structural Irrationality," in G. Brennan, R. Goodin and M. Smith (eds.), *Common Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). So on my account an agent's failure to act on a negative reason that he accepts as nondiscernable and undefeated comes out as irrational whatever the status or content of the reason.


27. A threat of overcommitment might seem to supply the kind of reason we need here: that accepting a task on the basis I am offered would lead me to accept too many others to be able to focus. But if this is stated in a way that works, then either (1) it amounts to a stronger first-order reason (about the even worse future consequences that acting on my current reason would have), contrary to our assumption that my reason to go after power defeats all competing reasons, or (2) it begs the question whether my first-order reason is optional (by assuming that I would be committed to acting on it in future whenever it arose).

28. Bratman suggests interpreting ideals as "quasi-policies" in "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency," *Philosophical Review*, 109:1 (January 2000), 35-61, pp. 57-59, since they may not be subject to the same sorts of demands for temporal consistency as policies on his account. However, by ideals he seems to mean those constitutive of an agent's identity, which I do not have in mind here necessarily.

29. I take the condition of coherence to rule out cases like Jean Hampton's "curmudgeon" – see "Rethinking Reason," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1992), 219-36, 233 – a paradigm case of instrumental irrationality who essentially discounts any reasons not reflected in his strongest occurrent motives and hence fails to go to the dentist, e.g., though he knows he needs to in order to avoid worse pain later. That there might be coherent rationale for privileging the present time is suggested by a version of the power case in which I act to avoid distraction even though putting up with it might result in more free time later – supposing, e.g., that one of the perks contingent on committee service involves preferment for research leave. I would not want my argument here to depend on how to treat this case, but note that avoiding distraction entails
maintaining one's present focus, giving preference to a project already launched over those that might be launched later. This will be coherent as long as it does not involve conflicting attitudes such as preference for the later projects or anticipatory regret at not interrupting my present project to allow for them. By contrast, if the curmudgeon tries appealing to an ideal of spontaneity, say, in a sense that would justify responsiveness to all and only his strongest occurrent motives, he will have to accept the probability of later regret, when he finds himself in the throes of extreme tooth pain. Anticipatory regret is an attitude in conflict with present intention, insofar as it amounts to a way of registering a criticism. I shall later discuss cases where regret can be discounted, but that involves discounting the reasons for it, and not just as limited to the present time. The curmudgeon's ideal apparently would not allow him to discount later reasons based on occurrent pain at the later time.

30. Raz intends the analogy to apply to exclusionary permissions in his intended sense; cf. *Practical Reason and Norms*, pp. 91-95.


33. We might grant, with Williams, that he would then have to have a desire (broadly construed) that requires joining the army, but it does not follow that he has such a desire now. In general, there seems to be something funny going on with counterfactuals in Williams’s appeals to the need to posit a desire in order for a reason to be capable of explaining action.

34. One might think that a claim of entitlement to discount practical reasons involves a move to yet another level, introducing third-order practical reasons and threatening a regress. However, I take it that the reasons for such a claim would be theoretical – reasons for believing that one is entitled. So what is in question here is theoretical rationality: whether there could be coherent and otherwise adequate grounds for the belief. One might dig in further here, of course, with questions to the amoralist about why whatever features are in question should ground the claimed entitlement to dismiss moral considerations, and whether the belief that they do must itself be moral.