RECONCEIVING PRACTICAL REASONS

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A practical reason may be thought of as the kind of consideration we invoke to guide action. Current accounts of practical reasons understand them as objective facts: considerations that count in favor of or against some practical option, typically action, independently of whether the agent recognizes them or their bearing on her choice. So the reasons I have for reading Proust, for instance, include ways in which the experience would benefit me – by enhancing my experience of the moment, let us say – whether or not I recognize any such benefits, but assuming they provide a basis for encouraging me to read Proust.\(^2\)

Where competing reasons are in play, reasons are understood as pro tanto considerations, holding in virtue of a subset of the relevant information. But the normative force of a reason that manages to defeat its competitors in a given case is usually taken as that of a command or directive, in line with a view of practical reasons as essentially action-guiding. The notion of a reason thus may be used to capture the notion of a “binding” ought or practical requirement.

However, though welcome as a way of demystifying "ought," this seems to put reasons in too authoritative a role. If I do recognize the value of reading Proust, I would on this account have to defend a decision not to read Proust by appealing to reasons on the other side – either making out my desires as themselves sources of reasons or insisting I have other, just as worthwhile things to do. But some of us would prefer to think of a reason like that suggested for reading Proust, a reason that appeals to the possibility of enhancing one's life in some way, as alerting us to an opportunity, not as imposing an obligation, even prima facie.

Joseph Raz assigns reasons this weaker sort of normative role in a recent defense of optional reasons in terms of incommensurability: reasons render an option eligible for choice rather than requiring it.\(^3\) One of Raz's examples is a choice between reading Proust and going
skiing over the weekend. With such different options in question, my reasons cannot be ordered on any single scale of comparison – there is no clear winner and also no tie between them – so they allow me a certain latitude for choice. Raz draws from this the general moral that the will plays an essential practical role as a supplement to reason. But while incommensurability is pervasive on Raz's account, he apparently is ready to grant that a reason that did defeat all competitors – what he calls a "conclusive" reason, since it concludes deliberation – would indeed yield a requirement.4

I think we can defend a stronger notion of optional reasons, though, of a sort proposed by some other recent authors, simply by shifting the normative spotlight from positive to negative reasons.5 As a consideration counting against some option, a conclusive negative reason would render it ineligible for choice, in Raz's terms – or it would tend to, depending on what other reasons are in play. We might think of negative reasons as "disqualifying" reasons, meaning reasons that tend to disqualify an option from choice. A reason for reading Proust, though expressed positively, would fall into this category if we took it to imply that there would be something defective about a life that lacked the experience of reading Proust. That is, it might involve a criticism of failure to read Proust and in that sense imply a negative reason. But otherwise – if it makes sense to have a purely positive or "qualifying" reason, on the model of a pure opportunity that I would not be subject to any significant criticism for turning down – my reason to read Proust comes out as optional, even if it does defeat any competing reasons. I may grant that I have nothing else just as good to do – no other, equally effective ways of enhancing my experience of the moment or of promoting some other, no less worthy aim, and no serious objections to reading Proust – but I can still get out of reading Proust without irrationality.
The result would be a looser conception of practical reasons, but one still capable of explaining binding ought, by appeal to serious negative reasons. On what I think of as the critical conception of practical reasons, negative reasons serve, in the first instance, to ground criticism of an option, showing it to be defective or in some way problematic, whereas positive reasons ground a certain kind of response to potential criticism, by citing an option's valuable features. Though positive reasons may typically be more salient than negative in motivational terms, it is negative reasons on this account that supply normativity, in the sense that implies a standard of correctness. They generate oughts or practical requirements insofar as it would be irrational to choose an option one takes to be subject to significant unanswered criticism. The action-guiding function of reasons in particular contexts thus may be seen as derivative from a more fundamental evaluative function in relation to criticism.

Reconceiving practical reasons in these terms might also have advantages that go beyond the issue of optional reasons. We commonly think of ourselves as criticizing or answering criticism of emotions and other practical motives and responses (including the formation of beliefs) by invoking practical reasons, even where this is unlikely to affect future action. The critical conception would seem to make more direct sense than an action-guiding conception of our reasons for responding to others' acts with scorn or admiration or for viewing our own past acts with satisfaction or regret – things we do, but without the kind of immediate control characteristic of action. So it might appeal on independent grounds to philosophers committed to rejecting optional reasons.

I have in mind particularly philosophers who take rationality to require maximizing perceived good, so that it would be irrational to ignore a reason that was conclusive in Raz's
sense. My defense of optional reasons in what follows will reject this assumption in favor of a "satisficing" notion of rationality, according to which it can be rational to choose an option that falls short of being the best but exceeds a certain threshold of value. "Rational," here and throughout this paper, means "within reason" – rationally permissible – not "required by reason." Though satisficing is sometimes set up as an extreme view, I think the critical conception allows for a moderate version, according to which, if my life will be rich enough without reading Proust, a decision to turn down that opportunity for further enrichment requires no defense in terms of alternative options or objections to reading Proust.

If one insists on understanding choices as rational only insofar as they maximize value, it will always be possible to reinterpret such cases by appeal to hidden costs, such as the likely effect on the value of the experience of any resistance on my part to reading Proust. So I shall not attempt an argument against a strict maximizing account. For my purposes, it will be enough to rebut the common tendency to present it as the only coherent account, by exhibiting satisficing as a reasonable alternative in certain cases. First, however, in Section 1, I want to spell out my proposed reconception of practical reasons in somewhat more detail, as needed to address objections to the notion of a purely positive reason. Then, in Section 2, I shall defend the view's departure from maximizing assumptions. Finally, in Section 3, I shall bring it to bear on the general question of the relation of reasons to an agent's will.

1. Criticism, Action-Guidance, and Options

In a nutshell, on the critical conception, rationality requires avoiding significant unanswered criticism, either by avoiding what is subject to criticism or by claiming that there is an answer to any applicable criticism. What is in question here is criticism the agent herself
would take as significant – after appropriate reflection, presumably; but I shall not try to pin down precisely what this entails. Nor shall I attempt to make "significant" precise; it essentially just means "worth paying attention to." It excludes reasons that appeal to trivial amounts of value or for some other reason are legitimate to discount. "Criticism" means potential criticism, not necessarily criticism that is put to the agent or even anticipated by her, though for purposes of assessing rationality we do assume she would recognize it as applying to her envisioned act. It involves an objection to the option in question as in some way defective or problematic, but an answer to it need only cite a point in favor of the option, rather than undermining the objection.

Accordingly, a negative reason is one that grounds a criticism of an act or other practical option and in that sense counts against it, whereas a positive reason answers a criticism of an option and counts in favor of it. Note that the classification of a reason as positive or negative is a matter of its relation to a practical option and need not apply either to the fact that constitutes the reason or to the option it counts for or against. Thus, for instance, the fact that smoking causes cancer counts against smoking and hence amounts to a negative reason, even though both it and smoking are described positively, rather than as a negation or omission of something.

We still may say on this account that reasons are invoked to guide action. For ordinary purposes (or initial philosophic purposes), that may be an adequate way of indicating what reasons are. However, talk of reasons as action-guiding cannot be meant to apply literally to objective facts. It is reason judgments that guide action: judgments (or in the third person, statements) that something is a reason. But it is natural to refer to these as reasons, and I shall sometimes do so myself, except where the distinction seems to make a difference.
My impression is that philosophers began to focus on reasons in the plural, as opposed to reason in the abstract, or reasoning as a psychological capacity, relatively recently, during the period of primary attention to uses of language. The characteristic purpose of the judgment or statement that something is a reason may indeed be action-guidance. If that were its only purpose, though, an agent's intentional failure to act on a reason she recognizes as undefeated would seem to violate even minimal requirements of rationality insofar as it would involve a conflict between intention and self-recommendation. So optional considerations can count as reasons only if reasons have some further purpose or purposes beyond action-guidance. The assessment of acts (or other practical options) in light of potential criticism is what I propose. To the extent that "nonideal" gives a form of criticism (an issue I shall have more to say about later), this subsumes assessment in light of the good. It can even be substituted for action-guidance as the purpose of reasons, since a reason (or more strictly, a reason judgment) will come out as action-guiding where criticism is applied to a possible future act – assuming the agent is rational and recognizes the criticism as significant.

A positive reason answers criticism in a particular way: by citing valuable features of the option in question. There are other ways of answering criticism – by attacking or undermining the criticism, say, or by lodging just as strong criticism against alternative options. So a purely positive reason involves more than a mere permission, and it might be used to guide action toward the option it favors. I would deny it normative force, however – as distinct from commendatory or motivational force – except as a supplement to a negative reason. Insofar as it yields a permission, it helps to ground a requirement where all alternative options are ruled out,
but it rules nothing out itself and hence does not supply a standard of correctness, as required for
normativity.

So purely positive reasons would be optional on this account. So would trivial negative
reasons (again on the assumption – which I shall leave for the reader to fill in elsewhere – that
the agent recognizes them as such), if we grant them enough substance to justify action. My
favorite example is the finding, sometime in the 70's, that "red dye #7" in jello and other foods
exhibit a very slight correlation with cancer. Rationality would not require that I avoid such
foods, even if this gives me enough reason to avoid them, so that it not would be irrational to do
so, assuming I have the time and energy to read all my food ingredients. It would be irrational
only for me to assign the reason serious significance and yet pay no regard to it.

My favorite example of a purely positive reason is an attempt by an administrator at one
point to motivate faculty to serve on more committees by stressing the possibility of thereby
achieving power in the university – apparently just as a pure inducement to committee service,
not as a warning about the likely effects of remaining without much power. I need not deny that
an appeal like this amounts to a reason – or even that it gives me a reason – in order to be within
my rights, rationally speaking, in turning it down. I can grant that power would be a benefit to
me, and perhaps even that I would be likely to develop a taste for it if I served on enough
committees. But I do not have one now and hence can easily dismiss the possibility of attaining
power as a reason, without having to counter it with competing reasons. We might suppose that I
have the requisite time and energy for committee service, and of course there are plenty of other
reasons to serve, but the point is that this “purely positive” reason can easily be brushed aside.
Many other examples might be cited, though for clarity of argument I shall choose one as my primary focus in what follows. The prevalence of cases in the literature involving choices among vacation spots calls to mind the many historically important sights and areas of the world that it would be nice to see at some point, though about each of them I would question what importance my seeing them really has. Laying eyes on the Roman coliseum, say, does not seem essential to satisfying my interest in Rome or Roman history. Nor do I think I would need to justify a choice not to go there by the effort it would take or the other things I want to do instead. Such reasons will always be available, of course, but they do not always seem to have a fixed weight prior to choice. Rather, we sometimes assign them weight by making a choice – thereby pronouncing a certain amount of effort “too much” – as if to preserve the illusion that the choice proceeds from authoritative reasons.

Some might be inclined to dismiss an ungrounded choice not to act on an optional reason as irrational insofar as it is arbitrary. However, the case of Buridan's ass, with a need to choose one of two identical bales of hay or else go hungry, shows that rationality is compatible with, and indeed sometimes requires, arbitrary choice. What might be rationally objectionable is an arbitrary recommendation or directive: a claim that one should take a given option, where there really are no conclusive reasons that favor it over others. However, this would not include use of an arbitrary decision procedure to resolve some issue, since the results of applying the procedure would count as conclusive reasons. Similarly for delegating authority to someone to make an arbitrary ruling – or someone's simply claiming authority, as one does oneself in arbitrarily breaking a tie. In terms of the critical conception: "arbitrary" counts as a criticism, but one that
in many cases can be answered. In cases of optional reasons it is answered just by appeal to the fact that the choice in question is up to the agent.

There may seem to be an obvious logical objection to the notion of a purely positive reason, since positive reasons would be logically translatable into negative and vice versa. A reason for going to Rome amounts to a reason for not failing to go, and hence a reason against not going. But I think this fails to capture the complexity of reason judgments. There is a prima facie ought operator in the content of a negative reason that serves as a barrier to simply shifting a negation sign between the description of the act or other option in question and that of the reason. A reason against going to Rome is a reason why prima facie one ought not to go; but whether my reason for going (that I could thereby see the coliseum) could yield that sort of compelling reason where it is unopposed – a reason why I should not fail to go – is just what is in question. I might be said to have a reason for not failing to go insofar as I have a reason to go, but this should not be confused with a negative reason, a reason against failing to go. A reason-for-not amounts to a positive reason for an act or other option described negatively; it would be implied by but does not imply a negative reason, a reason-against.

What is translated from positive into negative terms, in short, is not a reason's bearing on action but just the description of the act it bears on, so the status of a reason as positive remains intact. On the critical conception the normative function of a positive reason is limited to denying the force of a negative reason; its normative role is essentially defensive. Again, we should distinguish between normative and motivational force: a positive reason may have more of a role to play in action-guidance – including first-person action-guidance, or deliberation – than simply countering a negative reason. The standard cases in the literature, in fact, are cases
of choice among competing positive reasons, reasons for each of several incompatible alternatives such as going to Rome versus spending my vacation on the Italian Riviera. Assuming that my reason for going to Rome is purely positive, then, and hence optional, there would be nothing irrational about staying on the Riviera instead, even supposing that my reason for going to Rome is stronger and hence a more appropriate basis for a recommendation of action. So it looks as though rationality – at any rate, minimal, rather than ideal, rationality – does not require action on one's strongest reason; it just rules out recommending otherwise (at any rate, without appeal to some further, higher-order reason).

This presupposes, at least for the moment, a simple interpretation of the strength of a reason in terms of the degree of value or disvalue assigned to the option it favors or rules out. As with reasons, the value assignment would be independent of what the agent thinks, though it may well depend on psychological features of the agent such as what she would enjoy, what she has the background to appreciate, what interests her, and so forth. The critical conception introduces complications, however, when we compare strengths of reasons. For one thing, a positive reason that is just adequate to answer a criticism will defeat the corresponding negative reason – rather than simply balancing it, in terms that fit the usual picture of reason comparison as a matter of weighing pros and cons. Thus, if the prospect of seeing the coliseum is enough to answer objections to going to Rome in the summer heat, say, it defeats them and hence is conclusive in Raz's sense – but not in the sense of telling me conclusively what I ought to do, on the assumption that it yields a purely positive reason and hence still leaves me options.

Secondly, though, if we now turn to comparison of positive reasons, doubts about the notion of a purely positive reason need to be addressed in a different form. On the critical
conception, while the prospect of seeing the coliseum may yield a stronger reason for going to Rome than the reason I have for staying on the Riviera – that time on the beach is relaxing, say – it still will not tell me conclusively what I must do. However, even if there is no inference on the basis of logic alone from a positive to a negative reason, a positive reason would seem to imply a reason against options that in context are incompatible with the one it favors. If the prospect of seeing the coliseum gives me a reason to go to Rome, it also gives me a reason against staying on the Riviera, assuming I cannot do both. That staying interferes with going would seem to count as a criticism of staying in a case where it would be better to go.

I would deny, however, that the availability of a better option necessarily counts as a significant criticism – what was ruled out by the notion of a purely positive reason, as set up above. Even where the difference in value between the two options is assumed to be nontrivial, it is another question whether that should make the lesser option suffer by comparison – whether the agent will view it, or ought rationally to view it, as in some way defective or problematic, in a sense that entails falling below a threshold of adequate value. That will depend on a complex mix of contextual and psychological factors. There will be a difference, for instance, between a situation in which, in the middle of my vacation on the Riviera, someone offers me a place to stay in Rome for a few days, and the situation of choosing between Rome and the Riviera in making my initial vacation plans. In the former case, if I remain satisfied with my current plans despite hearing of a significantly better option – the absence of major historical sites does not make the beach now seem boring, for instance – it will be reasonable for me just to dismiss the comparison. But in the latter case, even if I decided just a moment ago to vacation on the
Riviera, the thought that I have a significantly better option ought at least to give me pause, unless we introduce some other measure of the strength of a reason besides value.

It is the latter case, of shopping among options arrayed before us, that is paradigmatic in treatments of rational choice. But I now want to argue that the former case, of an opportunity to trade in what one has for something better, gives satisficing a foot in the door, even on a simple conception of rational strength in terms of value. The notion of satisficing originally surfaced in economics in connection with limitations on human informational capacities, but even assuming an infinite capacity for managing multiple choice tasks at a given time, the enjoyment of options already in hand would often be undermined by after-the-fact comparison shopping, of the sort that commonly leads to regretting and sometimes revising past choices. However, I shall also argue that there is no fixed point at which one should take past choices as no longer subject to revision. The result is a version of satisficing that I think is importantly different from current versions. It will allow for purely positive reasons, not as a distinct type of (objective) reason, but as a product of context and the agent's choice.

2. Sensible Satisficing

It is easy to imagine opting for less than the best where one has some basis for choice besides that by which degrees of value are determined. Raz’s main cases are cases of incommensurability of values such as the choice between reading Proust and going skiing, where there is no single dimension of value on which we can plot both alternatives. But he also offers a case meant to show that incommensurability applies independently to reasons: in choosing between two movies an agent might be perfectly able to determine that one of them is better overall but still quite rationally decide to see the other because of its better photography. What
makes the fact that movie B has better photography incommensurable as a reason with the facts (about plot and characterization, for instance) that favor movie A on the basis of overall value would seem to be just the agent’s decision to rely on it as her criterion for choosing a movie. It thereby comes to stand in a special relation to her will. Compatibly with Raz’s view that a reason is identified as such by the fact that it ascribes value to what it is a reason for, this allows for a further factor determining the strength of a reason besides the degree of value it ascribes.

The point holds even for value conceived in relation to the agent, since the agent here does not have to hold that fine photography will be of greater value to her in particular than the other bases of overall impersonal or "agent-neutral" value.7 Photography may simply be the factor she decides to stress in making the choice, and rationally speaking she has every right to do so, whether or not she considers it a source of greater value. But this is something we can accept whether or not we accept incommensurability, just by granting that a rational agent sometimes also has the second-order option of selecting her preferred basis for making a choice.

As long as we also grant (as Raz’s here example does) that value may be commensurable in some cases, if we now take a case involving no reasonable grounds for choice that might conflict with overall value, that might seem to force a decision in favor of the best, making satisficing come out as irrational. Suppose I have to choose a flight to Milan, say, among several options listed for me on the internet. Two flights leaving at the same time match up in all relevant respects except price: A is cheaper than B. Though both are within what I can comfortably afford, the difference in price is significant. So A is clearly better for my purposes than B. How can it be rational, then, for me to satisfice, choosing B just on the grounds that it is good enough?
It seems bizarre to choose less than the best, in short, where (a) the agent recognizes significant differences in value among her options, and (b) all she wants, or could reasonably want, is value of that sort, with no other rational basis for choice. I would also add a further condition: (c) the agent stands in the basically the same relation to the different options in question. I think it is important that the case just described is a shopping case – of surveying “equidistant” options, with none already in hand or closer to achievement. In such cases, assuming (a) and (b) hold, we can accept the standard view that rationality requires maximizing value, while distinguishing what might be called "bird-in-hand" cases, where satisficing also comes out as rational.

"A bird in the hand is worth than two in the bush" is naturally taken as referring to the uncertainty of getting hold of the two birds in the bush, but uncertainty is not at issue in the cases I have in mind. Sometimes an option we have already chosen may be assigned, not just lesser value, but also lower expected utility (taking uncertainty into account) than another we might still substitute for it, but we have independent reasons for making ourselves relatively impervious to how it fares in comparison to alternatives.

A recent treatment of satisficing by a philosopher, Michael Slote, takes an "all-or-nothing" stance on the issue, arguing that a good-maximizing, or "optimizing," tendency would be less rational than satisficing as a general habit of mind. Slote attributes the relevant habit to a virtue, moderation, which would require satisficing even in the simple cases of equidistant options that I set aside above as cases where intuitively satisficing seems irrational. However, appeal to a virtue would provide an agent with another basis for choice besides degree of nonmoral value, hence violating my condition (b). On the more nuanced account I want to
suggest, satisficing is: (1) appropriate only sometimes, and even then (2) optional rather than required, and hence (3) not ideally the result of a general character trait or habit of mind but rather a flexible situational response.

The cases that philosophers find implausible, if I am right, are those that satisfy (a)-(c) in my earlier list, presenting the agent with options of commensurable value such that none is privileged over the others in relation to the agent's will. Besides relative value, that is, the agent has no other basis for choice in these cases — whether a particular form of value that she might choose to stress or the sort of "in-hand" status that concerns me here. The latter might be thought of as a temporal status, insofar as it rests on a distinction between the already and the not yet in hand, so I use "equidistant," meaning temporally equidistant, in an attempt to capture briefly the relation of the options in such cases to the agent's will.

A choice to satisfice in a case of equidistant commensurable options would seem to be irrational insofar as it involves ignoring the only grounds one recognizes for making the choice. But Slote's defense of satisficing seems to ignore any intermediate possibility between optimizing all the time (or at any rate, apart from extreme cases) and always satisficing. What I suggest is that a person might be rationally required to optimize in choices among equidistant commensurable options while retaining the right to satisfice where she already has a good enough option in hand.

Rational satisficing on this account presupposes both an order of attainment and a threshold of adequacy: one rests content with the first option in hand that exceeds a threshold of adequate value. Imperviousness to further comparison, as I put this above, involves more than just not soliciting information about options that might be better; it also means not responding
too readily to information or opportunities that present themselves, as in my case of being offered a place to stay in Rome in the middle of a planned vacation on the Riviera. Earlier I suggested a simple explanation in terms of protecting the ability to enjoy whatever option one chooses. More generally: it would often undermine the point of forming a long-range intention, as one does in choosing an option that extends over time, if one remained perfectly open to reconsidering it in light of alternatives. A certain amount of practical inertia is essential as a matter of follow-through on one's intentions.

The amount is neither fixed nor unlimited. I would not want to allow that we could in principle employ some sort of "stopping rule" to pick out particular occasions on which it would be in our interests to stop assessing options, whereas in practice we have to rely on a "quick-and-dirty" heuristic. Nor do I have in mind a "two-level" view requiring, rather than specific acts, general habits of mind such as bird-in-hand satisficing on the basis of how they promote happiness overall. This might have been suggested by my reference above to “enjoyment” of in-hand options as potentially undermined by optimizing, but my argument in the first instance appeals to something more like avoiding waste: too much comparison would render pointless many of the choices an agent already has made.

At the same time, though, I do want to allow that it would be rational to revise one's intentions in light of an opportunity for a huge increase in value. My argument here presupposes value differences somewhere in between trivial and huge and should be read as recommending a flexible maxim or rule of thumb on the order of: "Aim at the best, but be content with good enough." The thought that a perfectly rational being might do better than this, making fine enough discriminations in intermediate cases to determine where reconsideration would
undermine enjoyment enough to outweigh an increase in value, would be assuming not just perfect rationality but also perfect knowledge – apparently in advance of finding out and processing the relevant information, as involved in reconsideration.

What is required by rationality is itself defined by a threshold, then – of “not too much” reconsideration, but with how much that amounts to left to the agent's choice, on the model of an imperfect duty in ethics. It is choice that is involved here, rather than guesswork, since to some extent attitudes on the order of contentment are within control: we "content ourselves" (or not) with what is on hand. An illustration that occurs to me involves admiring someone else's food after ordering a meal in a restaurant: we choose the item that seems most appealing, then catch sight of something that looks even more so. It is still possible to call back the waitress and switch orders – nor would a single change of mind be all that embarrassing – but another possibility is just to avoid thinking about the comparison, so as not to diminish enjoyment of our own perfectly fine selection. Neither choice seems to be irrational.

Interestingly, if our motive for resisting comparison in such a case is to avoid waste – to make sure we are still able to appreciate the excellent meal we have chosen – it differs from an appeal to moderation insofar as it also favors finishing everything on one's plate, even if excessive. Intuitively, waste amounts to a kind of inefficiency, which might appeal to the general mentality behind optimizing, though an optimizer presumably would treat it as something we are rationally required to minimize – a factor pulling against the various goods we seek to maximize, albeit perhaps incommensurable with them. Of course, this is not the view I have in mind. For my purposes, the appeal to avoiding waste just serves to exhibit an intelligible point behind satisficing, so that it comes out as rationally permissible but not required. It makes
perfect sense, for instance, to object on grounds of waste to throwing out my VCR and other
electronic items every few years because they are cheaper to replace than to repair, even if
ultimately I decide on that basis to replace them. Within a certain range, at any rate, I can take
my choice.

I do not mean to suggest that an argument from avoiding waste could convince a utility
theorist, appealing as it does to "sunk costs." For my own part, though I grant that waste
aversion can become a fetish, I do think that many of our important aims have a backward-
looking element. But one might still object that the point of an intention would not be entirely
wasted in cases where the process of carrying it out involves benefits independent of whether
one carries it to completion – as would seem to be true of my planned vacation on the Riviera,
even if I decide to cut it short to move to Rome.

However, in keeping with an understanding of rationality as requiring a certain kind of
attitudinal consistency, we can also appeal to arguments that achieving even our forward-looking
aims requires coordination and hence presupposes a certain level of consistency over time.\textsuperscript{10}
That is, future preference satisfaction depends on the kind of coherence between long-range and
immediate intentions that makes us reliable planning agents. Here again, though, we need only
pass a threshold: with enough reliability so far, we have the option of abandoning our prior
plans on a given occasion. But our plans still give us a reason for follow-through, since we
might as well have further stores of reliability "in the bank."

This argument brings us back to the notion of an optional reason. There may also be a
reason to exceed a required threshold, in the sense of a consideration that gives it a point, but
without requiring it. For satisficing, what is in question is a threshold of consistency between
long-range and immediate intentions (plans and behavior), over time. In the vacation case it
might be said that too much flitting from plan to plan would undermine enjoyment, so it is well
to keep reconsideration to a minimum. But of course there is also a point in seizing a valuable
opportunity, even at the cost of abandoning settled plans. An ideal of situational responsiveness
or spontaneity, of a sort that rules out too sharp a split between desires and other feelings and
behavior, might be thought to pull against the requisites of planning agency in many cases, while
itself counting as one of the motivational underpinnings of effective agency.

By recognizing these two potentially conflicting considerations we do not just add some
further pro tanto reasons to those we already were assessing. These seem to be second-order
reasons, governing our responsiveness to first-order reasons concerning the value of our options.
As threshold reasons, analogous to imperfect duties, they favor only patterns of choice over time,
not specific choices on particular occasions – unless one has left adherence to them to the last
minute. With time to work with, moreover, an agent might be able to defuse a case of conflict
between them by adjusting her attitudes, contenting herself with a past decision and focusing
instead on follow-through. So the demands of reliability versus spontaneity have no fixed
weight in a given choice situation, assuming an adequate measure of each of them so far.

Ultimately, then, my own defense of satisficing in bird-in-hand cases rests on accepting
some key higher-order practical demands as leaving room for a decision on the part of the agent.
Whether or not we regard that decision as adding an incommensurable element to whichever
reason she chooses, optionality here has a more fundamental explanation in the vagueness of the
constraints on rational choice.
3. *The Agent's Contribution*

The point of my defense of satisficing was to make room for purely positive reasons by blocking the inference from a serious reason in favor of a certain option to a nontrivial negative reason ruling out alternatives. In at least one important set of cases, where an alternative is already in hand, one can rationally both acknowledge that substituting something else would result in a significant increase in value and decline to make the substitution. I take this to involve dismissing as practically insignificant any implied criticism of the option in hand – for a different (and more clearly rational) version of the temporal discounting of reasons that has been shown to govern the choice between nearer and more remote goods. Here again the agent plays a role, within limits, both in setting thresholds of adequate value and in determining whether a prior intention is still subject to change.

Thus, in the vacation case it is up to me whether my reasons for going to Rome versus staying on the Riviera count as purely positive, to the extent that I get to decide such matters as how much I need to accomplish on this trip and whether I would consider changing my plans in the middle of it. This is compatible with an interpretation of the reasons themselves as objective – applying to an agent independently of her beliefs about them (and, we might add, independently of her desires). The will plays a role, it seems, not just as a supplement to reason but within it, determining the bearing of a particular reason on action.

Even in cases of equidistant options the agent has a role in determining the significance of a reason to the extent that she sets her own threshold of responsiveness to value differences. It is up to her, for instance, in the cancer risk case that came up earlier, how much risk avoidance is worth the bother of reading all her food ingredients. Similarly, in bird-in-hand cases the agent
sets a threshold of tolerable revision of prior plans for the sake of improvement. That is, the agent has a certain latitude in these matters, but it is subject to limits. Some limits already have been noted: an exception was made above for huge increases in value, but also, on a psychological level, it should be obvious that we sometimes simply cannot manage to content ourselves with the status quo. On the other side, sometimes we have no choice, or no tolerable or effective choice, but to stick to longstanding plans: to attempt to revise them in the middle of carrying them out (or possibly even at some earlier time) would be too disorienting.

Normative constraints on holding plans fixed have had extended discussion in the literature in connection with "bootstrapping," which essentially would involve making an intention rational (to sustain, and ultimately to act on) just by forming it, so that it could be said to “bootstrap itself into rationality” – as Michael Bratman illustrates at length with the case of Walter Mondale’s ill-considered intention to raise a question about Star Wars in his first presidential debate with Reagan. Typically, one ought to reconsider an intention that was formed irrationally, but there are circumstances where reconsideration would be unwise. (Imagine, say, having second thoughts about the argument in a paper you are in the middle of presenting to an audience.) To limit bootstrapping Bratman therefore distinguishes between internal and external perspectives with respect to a given plan. Though it counts as rational from the internal or plan-constrained perspective of the deliberating agent to carry out even an irrational plan, the agent's immediate intention will be subject to rational criticism from an external perspective and will turn out to be irrational under conditions Bratman attempts to specify as requiring reconsideration. Thus, if a bird-in-hand case involved an irrational plan (rather than simply new information or a change in circumstances, as I assumed in my argument
for satisficing above), we would need to grant that the agent’s refusal to reconsider it later was rationally defensible in its own right.

John Broome in recent work uses a version of Bratman's bootstrapping argument against the idea that an intention is itself a reason for follow-through. If that were true, then simply by forming the relevant intention one could generate a reason for anything – including something for which there was no antecedent reason or (I would add, following Bratman) something intuitively irrational. Thus, in my example (and switching to Bratman's terms), if I chose to vacation on the Riviera on some irrational basis – perhaps because of swank associations with the French Riviera that could not conceivably fit the budget accommodations I would choose – it might also be irrational to stick to my plan when I am on the Riviera and am offered an option I now can see is better, the option of moving to Rome.

Of course, there are potentially reasons in favor of follow-through that are extrinsic to any particular intention, including both the agent's overall pattern of prior intentions (that she has flitted around too much in the past) and features of her psychology affecting the consequences of her two current options (that she cannot content herself with staying on the Riviera, now that she has the option of moving to Rome, whereas she can modify her plans and move to Rome without too much upset). Broome treats such psychological factors as complications to the point he wants to make about intention, but I think they bear importantly on the question whether the agent in such cases is required to follow through.

Broome introduces, as an alternative to talk of reasons, the notion of a normative requirement. This amounts to a wide-scope ought, here an ought applied to the connection between plan and follow-through, rather than to follow-through simpliciter (that I should stay on
the Riviera – a narrow-scope ought – if I plan to). Using the ought operator O from deontic logic: O(If I plan to stay, I stay), as a wide-scope ought, does not entail O(I stay), given that I plan to. Instead of staying, that is, I also have the option of revising my plan, even if in fact I fail to do so.

I take it, however, that detaching a narrow-scope from a wide-scope ought by granting its condition would be legitimate where the condition is unalterable – even with "unalterable" understood broadly to mean "too hard to alter" (another threshold notion), if not strictly impossible. In follow-through cases this would mean that the plan or longer-range intention cannot now be taken back (or in Broome's terms, repudiated). However, a mere intention, considered just as such, without reference to extrinsic psychological factors that might or might not accompany it in a given case, can always be taken back, as Broome assumes. It is only contingent psychological factors that introduce an element of recalcitrance to control – something that here acts in aid of rationality to the extent that it yields a requirement to follow through in a particular case and hence the kind of reliability that supports coordination.

Thus, for instance, if I have been counting on spending my summer vacation in the Riviera during all the preceding year, I might by now be unable just to drop the plan and cheerfully move on when the Riviera turns out not to be what I expected. My heart is by now set, even if I set it irrationally, on vacationing in the Riviera. "Emotional investment" sums up this aspect of commitment to a plan, in an analogue of the kind of material investment I might make by spending time or money to carry it out. Such investments, as supplements to intention, can modify what is rational for me to do – by depleting the relevant resources, as it were, making change difficult for me, not just making it a waste of past resources. In the emotional case they
can often result just from forming an intention and waiting a bit – sometimes just as a matter of human nature, rather than a particular agent's idiosyncrasies. What I suggest is that emotional investment on the part of an agent allows us in certain cases to detach specific action requirements from wide-scope practical oughts.

These reflections on detachment concern an inference on the part of a third-party – from what Bratman terms the external perspective. From an internal perspective, it might be thought sufficient that a deliberating agent is in a position just to take her intention as fixed: by refusing to reconsider it, she commits herself to following through. That is, she also has to take herself to be required to follow through – or in my terms in this paper, to have a negative reason, a reason against failing to follow through. But this does not imply that she actually has such a reason, with reasons interpreted as objective. To support an inference to an objective requirement, a prior intention actually has to mobilize psychological resources that in contrast to mere intention are recalcitrant to moment-by-moment control.

So, in short, the agent's contribution to practical reasoning – the bearing of her reasons on action: whether they count as serious negative reasons requiring action or rather just as optional reasons – is only partly a matter of will, or mere intention. Even with regard to the less logically complex matter of setting a threshold of significance, an agent cannot simply make herself take no notice of quantities falling below a given threshold. The effectiveness of an act of will, an intention, will depend on extrinsic factors such as what she finds upsetting and how much so – psychological factors that philosophers often tend to bypass too hastily, seeing them as distorting influences on practical reasoning, rather than its essential props.
Returning now to the influence of the will, or in my terms the agent's capacity to determine the strength of a reason: besides setting general thresholds of significance, an agent can also assign special significance to certain considerations counting as reasons, as in Raz's case of stressing photographic merit in the choice of a movie. Alternatively, an agent can discount certain reasons as insignificant, not just in cases where they fall below a quantitative threshold in respect of value, but also where they fall into a category she rejects as an influence on her decision. This is how I would handle the case I brought up earlier of dismissing the possibility of attaining power as a reason to serve on committees. In such cases, I take the agent to appeal at least implicitly to a second-order reason for excluding certain first-order reasons, or dimensions of value, from consideration – what Raz in his earlier work refers to as an "exclusionary" reason.17

This sort of explanation in terms of higher-order reasons would fit the "structural" picture of practical reasons that T. M. Scanlon outlines, using examples such as setting aside personal considerations in contexts of "friendly competition."18 However, Scanlon's cases seem to involve second-order reasons ruling out certain considerations as irrelevant to specified choice contexts. There is a generally applicable second-order reason, for instance, for playing to win even against a friend who might feel hurt if she loses, or for dismissing considerations of friendship in assessing candidates for a teaching position. By contrast, in the power case I need not think that the possibility of attaining power is always inappropriate as a reason to cite in favor of committee service – even for someone antecedently uninterested in attaining power like myself.
Such cases can involve adherence to an optional ideal – something that might seem puzzling in light of its apparent violation of the universality of reasons. Adopting a demanding ideal that one does not regard as making similar demands on others who choose not to adopt it might seem to involve taking some requirements as applicable only to oneself, holding only from an internal perspective. But in light of what I have argued here, we can understand an optional ideal from the external perspective as a purely positive exclusionary reason. "Exclusionary" suggests something negative, but the term is applicable to a positive reason for an option that is characterized negatively: not counting a certain kind of first-order reason in one's deliberations. In the power case, for instance, I might take it as a valuable feature of the kind of life I want to lead that it remain focused as single-mindedly as possible on intellectual projects, in a sense that rules out pursuit of power except where necessary to carry out my projects. Thus, I might recognize a generally applicable reason in favor of single-mindedness, and hence for ignoring appeals to power given my other aims, though I can grant others who share those aims the option of not being so single-minded in pursuit of them. I may regard lack of single-mindedness as an imperfection, but one that is easily compensated for by other perfections that I for my own part turn down as practical aims. So the kind of ideal that is in question does not support a significant criticism of someone else's life, as in some way defective. To the extent that adherence to an optional ideal entails feeling that one must live up to it, it may yield a subjective requirement, holding only from the agent's own standpoint; but it still amounts to an objective and agent-neutral reason.

To sum up my general conclusion in this paper: the practical strength or significance of a reason depends in part on the agent's will, even if its status as a reason does not. Someone who
regards a positive reason as significant need not take the same view of whatever criticisms of alternative options it implies. In that case her reason counts as "purely" positive, implying only a permission – an answer to potential criticism – and allowing for rational options, even without reference to opposing reasons. A purely positive reason may still be a powerful motive, but it does not yield a practical requirement, even if unopposed. However, serious moral reasons will not come out as optional on this account, if we take them to involve negative reasons of a sort that no agent is entitled to discount.20 So my use of the critical conception of practical reasons to allow for options leaves room for an understanding of moral and other requirements in terms of reasons.
1. For comments on an earlier version of this paper I owe thanks to Michael Bratman, Karen Jones, Samuel Kerstein, and Mark Schroeder.


4 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."


7. For the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative value see esp. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 164-75. Note that we could not limit ourselves to agent-relative value if we want to retain the view that the agent also has the option of seeing the overall best movie.

8. See Michael Slote, *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Slote's more persuasive examples actually seem to be bird-in-hand cases, and some of his comments suggest what I want to say here; cf. esp. his treatment of the case of the insatiable cookie-eater on pp. 59ff. Slote's arguments against attempts to explain away satisficing (e.g. by appeal to "instrumental" justifications of satisficing, particularly the one modeled on rule utilitarianism and other forms of indirect consequentialism on pp. 66ff.; cf. also the response to appeals to higher-order or "structural" goods on pp. 90-92) are useful as supplements to my argument here. However, he bases his positive argument exclusively on general parallels to ethical theory and thus insists on a justification that applies across-the-board – which leads to an over-rigid view of the possibilities in this area and too quick a turn to Aristotelian virtue ethics as his model for "inherent" rationality. Thus, e.g., when issues of
temporal consistency surface (see pp. 87ff.), he explains them in terms of personal traits (unity of the self vs. fickleness, flightiness, capriciousness, and the like) and treats them as one source among others of restrictions on optimizing. He takes no note of a more specific feature of deontological restrictions in ethics that might indeed provide a parallel, applicable particularly to bird-in-hand satisficing: that the restrictions typically rule out certain means to our ends and hence entail a relation of temporal priority. They would not rule out, say, choosing one of two outcomes that involves fewer deaths, but rather just a prior act of killing in order to bring about that outcome.


11. See George Ainslie, *Picoeconomics: The Strategic Interaction of Successive Motivational States Within the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), for a defense of discounting in such cases as rational; cf. Michael E. Bratman, "Planning and Temptation," in *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 35-57, for criticism of Ainslie's argument. bird-in-hand satisficing also involves a kind of slant toward the present moment, though if I am right, its defense as rational has a basis in the sorts of considerations of temporal consistency that Bratman's work stresses.

12 See Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, e.g. pp. 24-26; cf. pp. 42-49. I shall follow Bratman here in understanding a plan as amounting to a structure of long-range intentions.


14. See my "Conditional Oughts and Hypothetical Imperatives," *Journal of Philosophy* (1975), 259-76; for the extension to degrees of difficulty cf. "Behavior Control and Freedom of Action," *Philosophical Review* (1978), 77-83. Note that detachment might also be based on a normative premise, e.g. that it would be unreasonable to change a certain long-standing intention at this point, for a version of what I call deontic (as opposed to factual) detachment. (However, my formulation of the relevant inference principle in "Conditional Oughts," p. 259, was meant to bypass problems with material implication and would need revision, e.g., to handle the Good Samaritan Paradox.)
15. We might think of taking oneself to be required to follow through on an intention as what strengthens it into a resolution (cf. Holton, "Rational Resolve"). If so, it will be a further question whether a resolution really takes hold; but this surely fits our experience.


18. See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 50-55.

19. Cf. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp.73-74.

20. For more on the issue of discounting negative reasons cf. my "Adequate Reason."