

Practical Reasoning and the Contextual Content of the First-Person Perspective

Jae Hong Kim
Ryerson University

I. A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION ABOUT PRACTICAL REASONING

There is, perhaps, a genuine question about what practical reasoning really is. I do not refer to the question, what is the end or conclusion of practical reasoning, regarding which there has recently been much rich discussion.¹ Nor do I refer to the perennial question of what are the morally permissible means to achieve our ends.

Rather, I specifically refer to the fundamental question of whether there is a distinct species of reasoning to be called practical reasoning at all (I will sometimes call this the fundamental question). Anscombe tells us that the earliest answer we have to this question is an unequivocal “Yes!” from Aristotle. Her view is that Aristotle did in fact discover the existence of a genuinely different *kind* of reasoning, practical reasoning, in addition to the usual kind of reasoning we already suspect there to be.

Some interpretative or terminological remarks will be of use here. When Anscombe talks about the existence of practical reasoning I take it that she is saying something more than the claim that we can “think about” practical matters. That is a rather trivial point hardly worthy of remark. I do not believe this is the issue here. Rather, I take it that she is saying that a way of reasoning exists *sui generis* that specifically pertains to practical matters that always concludes in an action, if it is successful.

In the following section, I will try to explain Anscombe’s understanding of Aristotle’s discovery in more detail and her reasons for accepting it. In Section III, I will consider some objections to Anscombe’s view. In Section IV, I will introduce

some mental content that is essential to mental states in the first-person and argue that these contents would also be essential to practical reasoning, if it is a thing at all. But even if my argument is successful, I do not hope to therefore provide a conclusive answer to the fundamental question of practical reasoning. Instead, my aim here is more modest. I hope only to provide a reasonable criterion that any acceptable answer to the fundamental question must satisfy.

II. ANSCOMBE'S ACCEPTANCE OF ARISTOTLE'S DISCOVERY

To judge whether Anscombe is mistaken in accepting Aristotle's discovery, we must first clearly understand both what practical reasoning is meant to be different from on Anscombe's account and the reasons why she takes this to be true.² First, I suspect that Anscombe sees practical reasoning as different from what is often called "theoretical" reasoning. On my interpretation, Anscombe is basically describing nothing other than theoretical reasoning when she says that practical reasoning is different from "reasoning ordinarily considered in philosophy: reasoning toward the truth of a proposition which is supposedly shown by true premises." This is because theoretical reasoning usually refers to the kind of reasoning terminating in a proposition that is ideally made true by axiomatic principles, of the sorts taught in classes on logic that we use to evaluate the truth of claims and the validity of inferences.

So according to Anscombe, Aristotle's discovery was that practical reasoning is different from the aforementioned kind of theoretical reasoning, and she adopts this position herself, but why? Anscombe does not offer a specific argument. However, she does make a number of claims in order to expand and defend her view of practical reasoning. First off, she claims that practical reasoning ends in action, where theoretical reasoning ends in a belief (34). But, she also makes a more crucial claim that Aristotle's discovery hinges on a non-negligible "difference of form between reasoning leading to action and reasoning for the truth of a conclusion" (35).

What I take to be so crucial about this claim is that Anscombe here not only commits herself to a difference in the termini of the two kinds of reasoning (action vs. the truth of a conclusion) but also commits herself to a "difference of form" between the routes they take to reach their respective termini. Thus, her position appears to be committed to characterizing the difference between practical reasoning and theoretical reasoning as a "strong" difference in the very *forms* of reasoning, not only in the bare outcomes of reasoning. Naturally, she additionally claims that a particular episode of theoretical reasoning is "not practical reasoning," for the specific reason that "it has not the *form* (my emphasis) of a calculation what to do" (35). Presumably, it instead has a "proof-like" form.

At this juncture, it would be good to explore what Anscombe means in saying that practical reasoning has a different *form* from theoretical reasoning, so much

so that it is still a species of reasoning while not being the theoretical species of reasoning. To this end, let us consider a piece of practical reasoning she provides.

1. I believe that a piece of dry food is in front of me.
2. I remember that dry food is good for me.
3. I believe that eating this piece of dry food would be good for me.
4. Then, I eat the food.

Someone skeptical of Anscombe's view of practical reasoning may point out that 4 is in no way validated by 1, 2, and 3, and thus claim that what she takes to be practical reasoning is not reasoning at all. For even if we assume that someone believes that something good and nourishing is right in front of her, it does not follow from this that she will eat that food. It might be likely, but it is not necessarily true. Nor does it follow that someone who fails to eat the food while believing 1, 2, and 3 is irrational. They just might be full. Anscombe realizes this problem, and concedes that for the action "I eat the food" to be guaranteed in a "proof-like" manner, as conclusions of valid arguments in theoretical reasoning are, we would need premises that are so universal and so demanding that no one would ever accept them. One such premise would be

5. I should eat whatever is good for me, whenever I happen to find it in front of me.

Despite its patent insanity, the above premise does have the upshot of making the instance of practical reasoning more parallel to theoretical reasoning. Someone who *really* believes 1, 2, 3, and 5 is surely more likely to do 4 than before. Otherwise, we might judge her as being irrational, just as we do those who reject the conclusion of sound arguments but accept the premises. However, Anscombe claims that even without inserting such insane premises into a propositional representation of the episode, we can still say that episodes such as these are effectively pieces of reasoning.

The reason for is that if we further assume that my want of nourishment was a motivational "starting point" for the above episode, my eating is sufficiently something rational for me to do, and moreover is what would be more or less rational for others to do, given that they have the same want for nourishment as I do and the same beliefs as I do. To put this differently, my wanting of some end effectively explains why I am rational or intelligible in reasoning toward some act that will help me satisfy that end. My wanting can thus explain the intelligibility of my action even though my reasoning toward it may not have been proof-like in form. So much so that if someone next to me, Jones, were to go through the same steps of reasoning, but not eat the piece of dry food, the only explanation is that Jones must have not wanted nourishment. He had no intelligible reason to eat, but

I did.

For Anscombe to say that practical reasoning is a “form of a calculation what to do,” is then to say that the intelligibility of the conclusion of practical reasoning, an action, does not derive from the validity of the inference being made but rather from the intelligibility of the means-end reasoning induced by the presence of some desire for an end. In making this point, it is noteworthy that Anscombe relies on two unstated assumptions.

The first assumption is that the mere intelligibility of a series of mental events is sufficient for us to consider that a piece of reasoning. Accepting this assumption is what allows Anscombe to insist that practical reasoning be given an equal claim to the “throne” of reasoning, as it clearly lacks the rigorous proof-like form of theoretical reasoning. Since she effectively assumes that the property of intelligibility fulfills the condition of a series of mental events being “reasoning,” I will call this the Intelligibility Condition.

The second assumption is that *if* a piece of reasoning terminates in an action from a question of “what to do,” then it is a piece of practical reasoning. Since she effectively assumes that the action “being a conclusion” fulfills the condition of a reasoning being “practical,” I will call this the Conclusion Condition. In spite of not giving us further reasons to accept such assumptions, Anscombe takes that the question of whether there is a distinct form of reasoning to be named practical reasoning or not is therefore settled.

III. TWO POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO ANSCOMBE

I think we might be tempted to resist Anscombe’s take on practical reasoning for a number of good reasons. But, here I will only discuss two ways of going about it, focusing on what I take to be Anscombe’s assumptions. First, we might put pressure on the first assumption, the Intelligibility Condition, which said that a series of mental events is a piece of reasoning if it is intelligible, rationally justifiable, or normatively evaluable. A general rule that would allow Anscombe to assume the Intelligibility Condition might go something like this

1. If a series of mental events is intelligible, then it is a piece of reasoning.

This rule may seem initially promising. For if it so happens that we apply some of our cognitive capacities to perform a series of mental events that are intelligible to us and other people, we might be tempted to say that this means that that series thus qualifies as reasoning. But this rule suffers from a problem of collapse—that is, if it is true, it does away with practical reasoning altogether in favor of theoretical reasoning, for there appears to be only one standard of “intelligibility,” that of theoretical reasoning.

In essence, what I take to be an objection is that *if* the intelligibility of a series of mental events qualifies it as a piece of reasoning, *then* it seems this must be the case because there are certain normative standards involved in what count as an intelligible series of mental events as opposed to those that are not. If this is true, however, then it is puzzling as to what those normative standards can be, if not the very standards of theoretical reasoning. If this is right, practical reasoning derives its credibility as “reasoning” from the standards of theoretical reasoning, and is therefore a dependent sub-category within reasoning, not a distinct category of reasoning in and of itself.

Now, we might instead put pressure on the Conclusion Condition, which roughly states that when we reason, deliberate, ponder, or think, and conclude in an action, we are engaged in practical reasoning, for our reasoning concludes or terminates in an action rather than a doxastic attitude toward the world. Is this characterization of practical reasoning something Anscombe can just assume without further argument? I do not think so.

This is because practical reasoning under such a view gives us a far too liberal standard of when a type of reasoning constitutes a separate category. The general rule that validates the Conclusion Condition is

2. If reasoning does not conclude in a doxastic attitude (i.e. action), then there is a different type of reasoning for that conclusion in general (i.e. practical reasoning).

Such a rule justifies Anscombe’s position that practical reasoning is a distinct form of reasoning. While this rule may sound plausible, it is in fact absurd. If the presence of a different conclusion is all that it takes for something to constitute a distinct form of reasoning, then the problem is that we therefore commit ourselves to all sorts of “reasonings,” none of which seem intuitive for us to accept.

The rule may justify us thinking that when we reason to conclude that we admire someone from watching them do charitable acts, we engage in admire-reasoning. Or, that we engage in trust-reasoning when we reason to conclude if someone is worthy of trust from noticing that they behave in a discreet, reserved, and calm manner. As Judith Thomson asks, why do we not say that there is also admire-reasoning or trust-reasoning (38)? Unless Anscombe has further reasons in support of the Conclusion Condition, her view cannot do much better.

We can judge from these evaluations of the Conclusion Condition and the Intelligibility Condition that practical reasoning, taken under Anscombe’s view, as a distinct form of reasoning *sui generis*, is not something we can accept without reservations. While Anscombe may be motivated by some sound intuitions in arguing that there is a different kind of reasoning to be called practical, as Aristotle proclaimed, I find that she does not give us sufficient reasons why we should take this to be true. To argue for this, I have pointed out two assumptions that she takes

for granted, the Intelligibility Condition and the Conclusion Condition.

Now, I will argue that Anscombe's views suffer from a failure to account for the contextual contents of first-person beliefs, desires, and other mental states involved in what we may suppose to be practical reasoning. We need to account for such contents, whatever our view of practical reasoning. In the following section, I will introduce some distinctive characteristics about mental states involving the first-person. I will then argue, from two main considerations, why any answer to the fundamental question of practical reasoning must account not only account for the intelligibility of its conclusion but also the distinctness of "practical reasoning" regarding its content.

IV. CONTEXTUAL CONTENT AND PRACTICAL REASONING

So far, we have been trying to find an adequate answer to the question, is practical reasoning a distinct form of reasoning or not. Rather than posing an answer myself, I plan to point out one essential component to practical reasoning that either answer to the question must account for, among others. I believe that this essential component is none other than contextual content in the first-person. I believe two considerations on contextual content count in my favor. First, contextual content in the first-person is non-detachable to pieces of practical reasoning. Second, contextual content in the first-person is largely responsible for the urgency or necessity of action that is associated with practical reasoning.

First, allow me to explain why I believe contextual mental content in the first-person is non-detachable to pieces of practical reasoning and what the implications of this are for our discussion. It might be of use to begin by explaining what I take to be non-contextual mental content. Mental content that is non-contextual is mental content that is not tied to a particular context in which it was uttered. It is in a way "objective" in the sense that *if* it can be either true or false, *then* it is true or false regardless of any particular context or subject. It is also in a way "third-person" in the sense that *if* it can be either true or false, *then* it does not matter who in particular has the content in question.

But there is a type of mental content that does not fit the description above. According to Robert Stalnaker, there is a "distinctive" type of mental content, contextual content, where "the identity of the information is essentially tied to the context of speech or thought" (255-6). What this means is that for example, when I am looking for a treasure chest and say, "*That* is where the treasure is buried!" the truth or falsity of my thought content is dependent on what is identified to be the context in which it is thought. Where am I pointing to when I utter the phrase? To which direction am I standing? And so forth. The context may be conceived as encompassing anything as narrow as a time and place in this world, to anything wide as a possible or counterfactual world. At any rate, the relevant context of the mental content's occurrence cannot be detached from any normative evaluation of

it. I find this to be an uncontroversial claim on Stalnaker's part.

The existence of this non-detachable and contextual mental content, however, implies that when we give reasons as to why we performed a particular action, we cannot always just restate our first-person mental content, the actual mental content we had when we were reasoning. We cannot "detach" the mental content we had at the time of our action from its context and carry it around with us. For instance, I might try to give reasons twenty years after the fact about why I drove my shovel into a particular piece of land. I cannot simply say, "Well *that* was where the treasure was buried" and point my finger, all the while expecting others to understand the intelligibility of my action, even though that was an accurate, if brute, approximation of the actual mental content. Instead, I must, in varying degrees, describe my mental state non-contextually from a third-person point of view, that I believed that the treasure was not likely three feet away from the pirate flag, that the ground I dug looked like it was recently covered, and so on and so forth.

So we in fact need to abstract away relevant facts from the context in which we had the first-person mental states in order to make the propositional content of our premises in practical reasoning available for normative evaluation to other people. This means that the intelligibility of pieces of practical reasoning must in fact be explained in terms of more "objective" facts widely shared by people who have not been in the same contexts, while the actual reasons for performing some action will in fact involve non-detachable content that is contextually limited to those subjects in that specific context. But, we are nonetheless forced to describe such content in such a less context-dependent way and thus in a way less limited to people who might not have shared a context with us. For only if we are successful at this job will our episode of practical reasoning be intelligible to a person who does not share many contexts with us. And, this is a result we want to happen most of the time in communication.

The non-detachability of contextual content in the first-person is why I believe we are pulled in both directions when it comes to the question of whether there is such a thing as practical reasoning. We want to say supposed pieces of practical reasoning are like reasoning because they appear to involve the usual "proof-like" forms of theoretical reasoning, *when* we are giving explanations in the third-person perspective in terms of more objective facts. But, we also want to say that these episodes are essentially practical, because as I take it, they must involve non-detachable first-person mental states concerned with action in a way that theoretical reasoning *need* not.

So, any acceptable answer to the fundamental question of practical reasoning must account for this conflict, this "pull." If one is tempted to answer that practical reasoning is indeed a species of reasoning *sui generis*, as Anscombe does, then one must not only account for the irregular form that practical reasoning takes to progress to a conclusion, eschewing proof-like form, but also the peculiar *content*

that is usually involved in such a progression. If, on the other hand, one wishes to answer in the negative and deny the existence of a species of practical reasoning *sui generis*, one must show why any suspected case of practical reasoning is still just theoretical reasoning even though its content may be contextual and non-detachable to its context.

Here some might raise an objection: not only practical reasoning but theoretical reasoning too, involves first-person mental content that is contextual and non-detachable.³ Of course, this is true insofar as the objection is saying that we are limited or permitted to have certain beliefs in particular locations and times but not in others. But notice that there is a relevant difference; nothing involving truth-value is lost in translation in such cases of theoretical reasoning. The particular context in which I observe water to be H₂O and not XYZ does not matter for the truth-value of my consequential doxastic attitude toward water. That is, the context need not be identified in a propositional representation of the episode of theoretical reasoning for us to evaluate its intelligibility. But, my drinking water based on my belief that “I can drink *this* water *here*” from my immediate experience of “*that* water *there* is contaminated” does lose something essential if we evaluate its intelligibility without carefully identifying its context to the tether.

The second consideration I have in mind that supports my view of contextual content in the first person is that it is largely responsible for the urgency or necessity of action associated with practical reasoning. By necessity of action associated with practical reasoning I mean something quite ordinary. When we are resolved to settle a question of “what to do” or “what ought I do,” the force of the question can sometimes captivate our cognitive faculties, at the least until a definite course of action appears viable and ready. It seems “necessary” that we do *something* when we are faced with choice-worthy options, to the extent that indecision, or the failure to decide on a suitable course of action in such cases, may result in anxiety, self-doubt, withdrawing, and frustration.

For cases such as these, it is difficult to pinpoint a universal source of the emotional disturbance. However, I cautiously posit that mental contents that predominantly characterize our first-person perspective are more tied to these emotions rather than mental contents that do not. This is to say, standing beliefs about the “center-less” world that are more “objective” and “third-person” are not as “weighty” in these cases as the belief that one has to find some way of satisfying *this* hunger, to find which of *these* glasses fit best, to figure out which house among *these* is the party taking place. When we try to reason our way to an action, the contextual content of these concerns are paramount, for we are in fact imagining a possible world where these concerns are settled, calmed, or “silenced,” in a desirable way *by* our action.

Therefore, any acceptable answer to the fundamental question of practical reasoning, must account for the contextual content of these concerns and the sense of necessity they produce. If one is tempted to answer in the positive, along with

Anscombe, one must account for this content and sense of necessity with a more sophisticated account of the first-person experience of agency than the one Anscombe provides in her paper, where she seems to simply say that “desire” or “want” for some end grounds an episode of practical reasoning and makes sense of its intelligibility. If one is tempted to answer in the negative, one must show why so-called practical reasoning, in which this rich contextual content and the related sense of necessity in the first-person is so conducive to action, is still under the undisputed purview of theoretical reasoning and not a distinct species of reasoning *sui generis*. The way I see it, neither answer to the fundamental question of practical reasoning has yet to be conclusively formulated.

NOTES

1. Paul, Sarah (2013), Tenenbaum, Sergio (2014), and Streumer, Bart (2010)
2. Judith Jarvis Thomson calls this the “Difference Idea,” that practical reasoning is different from theoretical reasoning.
3. This was pointed out to me by Sergio Tenenbaum

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