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Response to Schwenkler

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DISCUSSION

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY WILEY

Response to Schwenkler

Jonathan Dancy

Philosophy Dept., The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

Correspondence: Jonathan Dancy, Philosophy Dept., The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, Austin, TX 78712, USA.
Email: jdancy@austin.utexas.edu

1 | Setting the Scene

First, we can all agree that not all intentional actions are the product of reasoning. I can act for a reason without going through a process that is worth thinking of as reasoning. A process that is worth thinking of as reasoning must have a certain internal complexity. If I have a beer because I am hot and thirsty, that sort of complexity is lacking.

Here is an example of practical reasoning. I am grading a paper and decide for various reasons that it merits a B+. So I (decide to) give it a B+.

Now admittedly, in this case as described, there is some theoretical reasoning involved along the way. In standard philosophical shorthand, I decided to V because I had decided that p. But I might not have passed through the stage of deciding that the paper merits a B+ at all. I might simply have done what the reasons present in the case supported, or most supported, without passing through a stage at which I form what one might call the "thin" judgement that overall it merits a B+; just as I can do a right action for the reasons that make it right without passing through the thin recognition of rightness. And I might not have given it the grade which I had decided that it merited. Perhaps I know of some mitigating factors that persuade me not to award the grade that the paper strictly merits. But the actual case is straightforward, and the fact that I do not know of any such mitigating factors is not among my reasons for giving the grade that I do (though it may be among the reasons why I give the grade that I do).

In his discussion of the account of practical reasoning presented in my *Practical Shape* (2018) Schwenkler (2021) starts from the question how an action can be "drawn from" premises. You certainly cannot get the action out of the premises. But then you cannot get a belief out of premises either. His "better reason" (p. 2) for doubting the possibility of reasoning to action is that it is unclear how an action could ever follow from considerations adduced in the sort of way that a belief can follow

I am very grateful to John Schwenkler for the time he has devoted to my work, first to improve it before publication, and now, after publication, in trying to show me where I was going wrong all along.

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from considerations adduced. But there is a danger of a false contrast here. Beliefs (in the sense of believings) cannot follow from considerations any more than actions can; it is things believed that do that. Accepting that p, however, is something we can decide to do, and something that we can do. And we can accept that p for the reasons that favour accepting that p, just as we can respond practically to a situation in the light of the reasons that favour our so responding. This, at least, is the position I take myself to be defending. I do not simply assume that practical and theoretical reasoning share a common form and are distinguished only by their content of subject matter, as Schwenkler at one point suggests (p. 3). I give a whole series of elaborate arguments designed to show that this can be so, and try to show that there is no reason to doubt that it is in fact so.

2 | Schwenkler's main argument

Schwenkler says (p. 3) that he will argue that the considerations adduced in practical reasoning frequently fail to favour a particular sort of action, let alone a particular action, but one can still reason from those considerations to an action that is a response to those considerations. Now the Prichard point has it that a reason is never a reason for a particular action, only for acting in a certain way; and I see nothing wrong with expressing this by saying that reasons can favour a specific action, which means acting in a specific way, but cannot favour a particular action in advance (since there is no particular action to be favoured unless and until such an action is in fact done). But this does nothing to show that it is therefore impossible to act for a reason. So it should not be surprising that reasoning can never manage to favour a particular belief (in the sense of believing) either. Once the action has been done, there is something of which we can say that it was done for that reason, or in the light of these reasons. But reasons can favour my acting in a way, or my acting as I do (which is another way of expressing the idea that they favour a specific sort of action), and we might act in that way in response to them. And similarly, I would claim, they can favour my responding cognitively as I do when I form a belief for that reason.

Schwenkler writes (p. 4) that acting in some way on the basis of deliberation is perfectly possible but should not be understood in such a way that one's deliberation shows that the case for doing what one did is stronger than the case for doing anything else. But the case for acting as one did (in response to deliberation) might well be stronger than the case for acting in any other way. Deliberation takes me (in his example) to making a meal of a certain sort for the children, but not to the meal I actually serve up. This is structurally similar to the ass who has reason to eat hay but no reason to eat this particular hay; nothing favours the left-hand bale that does not also favour the right-hand one. I say "structurally similar" rather than "structurally identical" because there are relevant differences between the meals between which I choose, but not (supposedly) between the bales of hay.

So this is Schwenkler's main argument. He has to make dinner for the children. There are several equally good options, but this does not prevent his picking one of them.

He says that cases of deliberative uncertainty are similar, but the one he outlines seems different to me. He says that in such cases one picks the option that seems to have the most to be said for it. But this "seeming to have the most" is a tiebreaker. If he had said the same thing about the dinner he decides to cook for his children, that example would not have served his purposes anything like as well.

He contrasts this case with a theoretical one in which there is no best answer to the question what to believe. Suppose the case against the butler is a bit stronger than the case against anyone else, but not so much stronger that I am entitled to draw the conclusion that the butler is the guilty party. There is just not enough superiority of evidence to justify that belief. This we should contrast with the practical case, where any superiority of reasons is enough.

I think that Schwenkler spoils his point here by supposing that practical reasoning is reasoning to an "ought"; he points out that I can get to an "ought" without having actually made my mind up about what to do. (He actually says "about what I am going to do", which is different, and worse since I can equally make up my mind about what you are going to do, but this is not practical reasoning of any sort.) But this is irrelevant; in the present debate, reasoning to an "ought" counts as theoretical because the product of such reasoning is a moral belief. The point should be that any superiority is enough for practical reasoning, but for theoretical reasoning we might need more. And I doubt this contrast. Suppose that I am contemplating doing an action which will be considerably profitable to me but which will involve you in substantial loss. My gain will be greater than your loss, but that fact alone is not sufficient to justify me in imposing that loss on you.

3 | Good and Bad Cases

My rhetoric of the good case and the bad case was obviously tendentious. But I intended it mainly to be reminiscent of disjunctivist approaches familiar in other areas. And is it so alarming to suggest that sometimes deliberation does establish one way of acting as the most suited to the situation—as when I give the paper a B+? Unsurprisingly, the action that one then goes on to do will have all sorts of features about which the considerations adduced will have nothing to say. I write "B+" in pencil with my right hand, sitting in my office. But that does not seem to be a difficulty. Acting in those ways was not favoured by the reasons for which I acted.

Disjunctivism is not committed by its talk of the good case and bad cases to the view that one disjunct is more common than another. So Schwenkler's remark that "it is not at all clear that Dancy (2018) is correct in regarding this case as the bad one; it is, rather, a perfectly normal situation to find ourselves in" (p. 5) is not really apposite. Belief is just as normal as knowledge, but this will not have any impact on a disjunctivist who wants to reverse the traditional approach that tries to understand knowledge as a specially privileged form of belief.

4 | Reasoning without Oughts

Schwenkler says that "Practical reasoning is a form of thought by which we *make* the world to be as we think it ought to be, rather than one through which we get our minds to reflect the antecedently given shape of our practical situation" (p. 5). It is the "rather than" that I question here. I would prefer: "Practical reasoning is a form of thought in which we *make* the world to be as we think it ought to be, *in response* to the existing shape of our practical situation as we determine it to be". But I would myself say that we do not need to decide how things ought to be before we decide what to do; the explicitly normative decision about how things ought to be is not an essential stage in practical reasoning. The reasons to act are also reasons to believe one ought to act (or that the world ought to be a certain way), but they are reasons to believe one ought to V because they are reasons to V. And one can go straight from those reasons to V-ing without passing through the "ought".

At this point in his paper, Schwenkler says (p. 5, fn.8) that he is trying to challenge the idea that practical thought is an attempt to get our minds to fit an antecedently given shape. My intention had rather been to suppose that practical thought is an attempt to build a normative understanding of the situation which will fit the relevant facts, where those facts are, or at least include, the normative relations here exemplified. So practical thought is practical in two senses. It is the building of an

understanding, and what is understood is practical shape, that is, how the situation so understood calls for this rather than that form of practical response.

5 | More on Equipollence

Schwenkler asks (p. 5 still) whether the phenomena of equipollence and choice under deliberative uncertainty should persuade us, as they have apparently persuaded Raz (2011, 2015) and Paul (2013), that selection from a range of permissible/acceptable alternatives is not reasoning at all. He says not, because the significance of calling it reasoning is that it is not done for no reason, or just because one wanted to/felt like it. He appeals to Anscombe's (1957) remark that "the mark of practical reasoning is that the thing wanted is *at a distance* from the immediate action, the immediate action being calculated as the way of getting the thing wanted" (*Intention*, p. 79). But Anscombe clearly did not have the phenomenon of equipollence in mind here, given her talk of "the way of getting the thing wanted". Further, this instrumental conception of practical reasoning seems to me to be optional at best. There are other reasons than this for saying that mere selection is not reasoning, even when it is done for a reason. One can reason to selecting, but if reasons have then given out, one is not reasoning to the option selected. The whole point about plumping is that you do it when reasons have given out. Still, when one plumps, the list of options is generated by reasoning. And however one ends up acting, one had reasons for so acting.

Schwenkler also suggests (p. 6) that all three of us (Raz, Paul and me) have fallen into the trap of supposing that if we are reasoning to a conclusion, the considerations that favour that conclusion must support doing this rather than something else—or anything else. But I do not think I do make that mistake. A reason is a consideration that favours a certain response. It does not necessarily have a comparative focus, so that it favours doing this rather than anything else. There are such comparative reasons, certainly, but they are of a special kind. What is more, Schwenkler suggests that the mistake—if it is a mistake—is only a mistake in practical reasoning; on the theoretical side, any sufficient grounds for accepting one hypothesis will be sufficient grounds for rejecting all alternatives. I wondered whether this is so. Can there be two ways of reading a complex situation, either being defensible? I imagine that the writers of detective stories would say yes. I recommend watching Jonathan Lynn's film *Clue*.

6 | Reasoning to an action

In his Section 3, Schwenkler considers the prospects of a weakened expression of my view, under which all that practical reasoning can serve up is a specification of a sort of action most favoured by the considerations adduced, leaving it open whether there might not be another sort equally favoured. On this view, the point of practical reasoning is to produce a blueprint for action than which there is none better. At this point, the matter is, quite properly, left up to choice. His reply is that there is no unitary relation of "favouring" according to which potential actions can be evaluated. So there is no matter of fact here to figure out. All we can say is that each option is acceptable in its way, and neither has any significant defect. So the action chosen is not bad, and no worse than its alternatives with respect to the specific considerations one takes to recommend it. He allows that we can compare options with respect to specific values, but not with respect to overall goodness or choiceworthiness. I cannot myself see any reason for this last claim, which anyway is at odds with any suggestion that deliberation throws up several equally favoured options.

Schwenkler recognizes that denying that there is such a thing as the action, or the sort of action, that is best or most favoured in a given situation is a significant theoretical importation. But he says that it is justified because of the substantial assumptions involved in thinking of practical rationality as a matter of maximizing goodness (p. 9). My response to this is that this move involves too easy a slide from the theory of reasons to the theory of value. The favouring relation is not a relation in the theory of value. Being a reason for V-ing is not the same sort of relation as making V-ing better, at least not as I understand the matter. So my own view about this suggestion is that it involves the sudden introduction of a very substantial position in the theory of value, and one that is not necessary for the elaboration of the less demanding position Schwenkler is suggesting (on my behalf).

In his final section, Schwenkler accuses me of a "contemplative" conception of practical deliberation. The reason he gives is that values play the same role in reasoning to action as considerations of truth and probability play in reasoning to belief. He continues: "in each case there is a response, or way of responding, that is most favoured by the shape of the situation one is in". This is a peculiar train of thought. I introduce values at a specific point in the story I tell, as explanations of practical reasons, and I appeal to truth–relations to explicate theoretical reasons. (I do then go on to ask whether we might treat truth as a value, but that is to some extent a matter of speculation.) But appealing to value to explain practical reasons is not the same thing as supposing that practical reasoning is the search for maximum value. "Most favoured by" is not the same relation as "made best by", despite certain remarks in Schwenkler's final paragraph.

His alternative suggestion is that the agent who makes a choice, e.g. of what to cook for supper, does so on the ground that it is a good way of getting something that he rightly desires. My own view about this is that one's question can often be, not how to get something that one wants, but what to want. We always need to take great care about the exact point at which we introduce desires into the story, given the history of philosophical use of that notion.

He then suggests that practical reasoning is the search for an answer to the question "What shall I do?" I recognize that this question is not offered as an enquiry about the immediate future, but still I much prefer the question "What am I to do?" which keeps in view the deontic style of the enquiry.

David Sosa (forthcoming) points out that Buridan's ass can perfectly well reason to a practical conclusion: eating hay. What the ass cannot do—and nor could we—is to reason to eating from the right-hand bale, since there is no relevant difference between the two bales available for him to appeal to. At that point, he can only decide or choose, and he has a reason to choose, and he has a reason for each choice, but just the same reason for the other choice. So whichever choice he makes, he makes for a reason. But he cannot reason to that choice.

The interesting point here is that we are not able to tell the same story about belief under uncertainty (of a certain form). Suppose that, for medical reasons to do with peace of mind, I need to decide whether a person whom I have always thought of as my son is in fact mine. Suppose that the evidence is evenly balanced. It might still be better for me to believe that he is indeed mine. But it is not possible for me to believe this for that reason.

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