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Intention and Prediction in Means-End Reasoning

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(Penultimate draft)

Abstract

How, if at all, does one's intention to realize an end bear on the justification for taking the means to that end? Theories which allow that intending an end directly provides a reason to take the means are subject to a well-known "bootstrapping" objection. On the other hand, "anti-psychologistic" accounts—which seek to derive instrumental reasons directly from the reasons that support adopting the end itself—have unacceptable implications where an agent faces multiple rationally permissible options. An alternative, predictive, role for intention in means-end reasoning is considered and rejected. A new proposal is then developed, according to which instrumental reasons are not merely reasons to perform an act necessary for a given end, but to perform the act *for the sake of that end*.

Suppose I have adopted some end—there's something I intend to do, or some goal I'm aiming to achieve. And suppose there is some action, ϕ , I must perform if I'm to achieve this end. Does this conjunction of facts have any bearing on whether I should ϕ ? Does it give me any reason to ϕ or help to justify my doing it?

There is reason to think that the answer to these questions must be "no." The reason is that to suppose one's commitment to a given end itself provides some positive reason or justification for taking the means to that end seems to license an illegitimate form of bootstrapping. A principle of instrumental reason according to which one has reason to take the means to some end if one intends

that end would allow one to create, simply through an act of will, reasons for oneself to pursue a course of action one might have otherwise had no reason at all to pursue. And this, as I will explain below, is at odds with the function of practical reasons in guiding deliberation and choice.

Of course, this is not to deny that much of our practical reasoning is a matter of our figuring out how to best realize our ends. It does raise the question, however, of how to account for the general validity of this form of reasoning, if not by seeing an agent's pursuit of an end as giving her reason to take means to that end.

A familiar and promising answer to this question is that a sound principle of instrumental reason describes the *transmission* of reasons from ends to means. According to this alternative approach, the very considerations that count in favor of adopting a particular end in the first place also provide reasons to pursue the means. Moreover, the principles by which rational support is transferred from the end to the means do not make reference to any psychological facts as to whether an agent has decided on or is committed to pursuing the end.

And yet, I will argue, this anti-psychologistic approach has unacceptable implications of its own. It faces difficulties in situations where there are multiple permissible but incompatible ends one could pursue. In such cases, one's choice of means should reflect one's choice of ends. The mere fact that some act is necessary for an end or goal it would be worthwhile to achieve is not enough. Unless one actually intends to pursue that end or goal, taking a necessary but insufficient means toward it will be pointless.

So, we have two opposing theories of the source of instrumental reasons. The first holds, roughly, that one has a (normative) reason to perform an act if it is necessary for an end one *intends* to realize. The second holds, roughly, that one has a reason to perform an act if it is necessary for an end one has some *reason* to realize. Both types of account, however, face serious objections.

I believe that, in both cases, the objections stem from something the two accounts have in

common. Both views assume that a principle of instrumental reason provides a standard that applies directly to acts which are themselves specified independently of any end or purpose the agent might have in performing them. That is, the principle is understood as identifying a type of reason that counts in favor of an act, considered simply on its own, as one of the things an agent might do in her circumstances. But this, I will suggest, is a mistake. Instrumental reasons are not simply reasons that direct an agent to perform a discrete, more or less self-contained option—an option she might just as well have chosen for entirely different reasons. Rather, the correct principle of instrumental reason directs the agent to take means to an eligible end *for the sake of that end*. The proper application of the instrumental principle thus depends on how we individuate the options relevant to the agent's choice. Being clear about this will allow us to avoid concerns about bootstrapping by grounding instrumental reasons for action in the independent reasons or values that support the relevant ends, while at the same time avoiding the absurd result that agents will often have instrumental reasons to take steps toward realizing ends they have no intention of pursuing further. Or so I will argue.

In § 1 I will explain the motivations for thinking that psychological facts about an agent's intentions are irrelevant to the question of what reason the agent has to take the necessary means to a given end. § 2 outlines the alternative, anti-psychologistic approach, according to which instrumental reasons derive from the reasons an agent has to adopt the end itself. I argue in § 3 that this anti-psychologistic view has unacceptable implications in cases where an agent faces multiple rationally permissible, but mutually exclusive options. In § 4 I present and criticize one approach to responding to these problems, according to which our intentions have a primarily predictive role in our reasoning about means. I will argue that this view ultimately raises the same sort of concerns about bootstrapping that motivated the anti-psychologistic approach in the first place. The remainder of the paper (§§ 5-9) develops and defends an alternative account of instrumental reasons that assigns a different role to the agent's intentions in means-end justification, one that allows us to avoid the

problems mentioned above.

1. Against Psychologism

If I have no reason at all to adopt a particular end, then how can my intending, unreasonably, to pursue that end provide any reason to do what will help achieve it? The fact that a particular course of action is necessary to achieve a worthless end does nothing to speak in favor of that course of action regardless of whether or not I intend to realize that end.¹

Imagine that I decide, unreasonably, to rotate the square tiles in my bathroom 90 degrees. This will require tearing them up, rotating them, and reaffixing them to the floor. If my decision to pursue this end of functionally and aesthetically indistinguishable tile-rotation gave me reason to take the necessary means, then I'd have some reason to tear up, to rotate, to reaffix. But to tear up, and then rotate, and then reaffix the tiles altogether constitutes the realization of my end. Thus an unreasonable decision to pursue a worthless end would all by itself give me reason to achieve that end. But I can't give myself reasons to do things in this way. There is obviously something wrong with this sort of bootstrap reasoning.

It might seem that what is going on in this case is that we are distracted by the obviously compelling considerations against my proposed course of action. It could be argued that we therefore shouldn't rely on our intuitions about such a case. For it might be that, although my adoption of the tile-rotation end does provide *some* reason to pursue the means, what I obviously *should* do, all things considered, is abandon the end.²

Even if we set aside our intuitions about cases like this, however, there are more theoretical reasons for resisting the idea that we can, by intending an end, thereby create reasons for ourselves to take the means to it.

If a person's ends are themselves evaluable, such that it makes sense to ask whether, given her

options, she has good reasons for intending to pursue this or that end, then the independent reasons for and against the different possibilities should constrain deliberation in a way that prohibits bootstrapping.³ First, it's clear that this prohibits the most direct form of bootstrapping, according to which one takes the fact that one intends an end to be a reason in favor of that end. The reasons that bear on whether or not to pursue some end or plan of action, given what will be involved in its pursuit (as compared to relevant alternatives), ought to figure in the agent's deliberation, guiding her decision about whether to adopt that end or plan. But if that's so, then whether there is sufficient reason to pursue one end rather than another cannot depend on whether one intends to do so. If it did, then one could not properly compare the alternatives open to one without knowing which option one intended to take. One's intention to perform a given alternative, however, ought to be the result of the deliberative process, not an input to it.

Thus, the reasons in favor of a given end, as compared with the available alternatives, must be independent of whether one intends to pursue that end.⁴ What about reasons to take the necessary means to an end? The same argument shows that they, too, must be independent of the intention toward the end. As noted above, whether one's reasons are sufficient for adopting a particular aim, as opposed to some alternative, will depend on what one will have to do to achieve it. Regardless of how great it would be to accomplish a certain goal, one should not commit oneself to it if one knows that there are decisive reasons against doing what would be necessary for achieving it—or if there are decisive reasons in favor acting in a way that would make its achievement impossible. And given this, if the intention to pursue an end made a difference to one's reasons for taking the steps necessary for achieving it (or for refraining from conflicting pursuits), it would follow that one's intention can make a difference to whether one has sufficient reason for pursuing the end itself. Again, such bootstrapping is unacceptable.

The fact that some course of action will be a means to a particular end would seem, therefore,

to count in favor of that course of action, or not, independently of whether one already intends to achieve that end. It's only if one acknowledges this that one can regard the decision to undertake this course of action as beholden to one's assessment of the value of achieving the end.⁵

2. Normative Transmission

The above considerations suggest that what justifies taking the means to an end is the value of achieving the end, not the psychological fact that one has adopted that end, or that one intends to promote it.

This is clearest where the reasons for adopting an end or goal in the first place are decisive. If I should see to it that my child receives a decent education, then under normal circumstances I should do what's necessary for that end—arranging for her to go to school, as the case may be. What does the normative work here—what makes it true that I ought to enroll the kid in school—is the fact that I ought to make sure my child gets a good education (along with the assumption that formal schooling is the best, or only feasible, way for me to do this). And if, as it happens, I have no intention of educating my child—it's not an end I have adopted for myself—this would not change the fact that I should enroll her in school.

On the other hand, if we consider an end one has conclusive reason *not* to adopt—for example, destroying an innocent person's reputation—then the fact that some act would contribute to this end in no way counts in favor of doing it. Even if Carla is firmly committed to destroying Ralph's reputation, this is no reason for her to spread malicious rumors about him.

None of this is to deny that Carla would exhibit a kind of irrationality were she to intend to destroy Ralph's reputation while repeatedly passing up opportunities to do so. But admitting this does not commit us to any view about the power of an intention to justify actions (or further intentions for

actions) which are taken to be necessary for realizing the object of the intention. Even if we think that means-end incoherence is, as such, to be avoided,⁶ we need only remember that there will always be more than one way to go. If one has an intention to promote a certain end, but irrationally lacks an intention to take the means one knows to be necessary, one can achieve coherence either by forming the intention to take the means or by abandoning the intention to bring about the end. If the end is not worth pursuing, it's obviously this latter course one should take.

There are thus two questions that should be distinguished. The first question is whether one has any reason to take the means to a specified end. The second question is whether one's failure to intend the means to a given end would be irrational. And the general strategy, which is hopefully beginning to sound familiar, is to claim that while a person's mental states are relevant to this second question about coherence or rational functioning, they are not (at least not directly) relevant to the first question about whether she has any good reason to take actions in the service of a particular end.⁷ Since I'm interested in the first question, concerning instrumental reasons for action, I'll call this strategy "anti-psychologism."

3. Problems for Anti-Psychologism

To see why the anti-psychologistic account of means-end justification is untenable, imagine a case where there is sufficient reason to pursue either of two incompatible ends: I'm trying to decide how to spend my afternoon. I could go visit my friend Gilly or I could check out the new Van Gogh exhibit at the Art Institute. Both would be good ways to spend the afternoon, but I only have time to do one or the other. Now, to get to the Art Institute I need to travel south on Michigan Ave. Gilly's house is to the north, across the river.

Do I have any reason to cross the river to the north? Only, it seems, if crossing the river is undertaken in execution of a larger plan to go see Gilly. If, instead, I intend to go see the Van Gogh

exhibit, going north across the river would be going in the wrong direction—a waste of time and energy.⁸ Crossing the river is necessary if I am to see my friend, which is something I have sufficient reason to do this afternoon. But it would be odd to conclude that this by itself is enough to give me a reason to cross. This reason this seems odd is that its being *necessary* for achieving an end I have good reason to pursue is entirely consistent with its being an entirely pointless action, one that in fact serves no purpose. It's thus hard to see how I could sensibly regard the fact that I have to cross the river if I'm to get to Gilly's house as something that counts in favor of crossing the river without conceiving of that crossing as a step in a larger course of action culminating in my goofing around with Gilly.

Thus, even if the end is a good one—one I have sufficient reason to adopt—it seems we cannot necessarily say, without considering my intentions, whether I have any reason to do what's required for achieving it. The problem with the normative transmission view is that it identifies a certain consideration as reason-giving—that an act is necessary for a worthwhile end—that does not really count in favor of performing the act except insofar as the agent actually intends the end it is necessary for. Yet the proposed transmission principle is indifferent to the agent's intentions. It therefore implies that we have instrumental reasons to do things we fully acknowledge will be useless (given our actual ends). And that cannot be right. We ought, then, to reject a purely anti-psychologistic account of instrumental reason.

In what follows, I will consider two alternative accounts of means-end justification in which the agent's intentions do figure, though not as sources of further reasons for action.

4. The Predictive Significance of Intention

On the first such approach, the significance of the agent's intention is primarily epistemic—providing reasons to believe that one's present action will in fact contribute to the realization of the end in question. According accounts proposed by John Brunero and Niko Kolodny, for instance, a person's

intention to achieve a certain end can make a difference to her justification for taking means to that end, though not by providing any further practical reason to take the means. If there is an instrumental reason to act in some way, this is still grounded in whatever reasons support the end furthered by that action. The agent's intention matters, however, in that it normally serves as an indicator or source of assurance for the agent that her act will indeed be useful or effective as a means to the end in question.⁹

On Kolodny's view, for example, an instrumental reason to perform some action is not given just by the fact that the act is *necessary* for an end one has a reason to pursue. It must also be at least somewhat probable that one's performing that action will in fact help to bring about the relevant end. Specifically, he offers the following principle:

Means Probabilize: If there is reason to E and there is *positive probability*, conditional on one's M-ing, that one's M-ing, or some part of one's M-ing, helps to bring it about that one E's, then that is a reason to M, whose strength depends on the reason to E and on the probability.¹⁰

But whether one has reason to believe the "positive probability" condition is met will often depend on one's intention. If one doesn't intend the relevant end, or one intends something incompatible with that end, this should lead one to doubt that taking some merely necessary step will be of any use. This is what Kolodny, following Scanlon, calls the predictive significance of intention.¹¹

The appeal to an intention's predictive significance helps to avoid the criticism I raised earlier, to the effect that the normative transmission view countenances reasons for pointless actions. But I think it throws the baby out with the bathwater. I say this because the account reopens the door to the bootstrapping objections that motivated anti-psychologism to begin with.

My objection to the predictive view is that, although it does not imply that one can will into

existence entirely new reasons for action, it does imply that one can, simply by adopting a given end, affect the *strength* of one's reasons to take means to that end.¹² And this is not much better.

Intuitively, the strength of an agent's reasons to take necessary means to a given end should generally track the strength of the reasons one has to achieve the end. In particular, if one has stronger reasons in favor of one end as compared to another, and one has to choose between them, one would expect to have stronger reasons to do what is necessary for realizing the former. Not so, according to the predictive view.

To see this, consider the following. Suppose one has some reason to bring about a state of affairs, X, and some reason to bring about a different, state of affairs, Y—though one cannot bring about both. Acts *a*, *b*, and *c*, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for achieving X; acts *d*, *e*, and *f*, are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for achieving Y. Suppose there are no other relevant considerations. Assuming the predictive account, and simplifying somewhat, we can run the following argument:

1. The reasons that support bringing about X provide one with reasons to do *a* if and only if one is warranted in believing that, if one does *a*, one will also do *b* and *c*.
2. The reasons that support bringing about Y provide one with reasons to do *d* if and only if one is warranted in believing that, if one does *d*, one will also do *e*, and *f*.
3. If one intends to bring about X rather than Y, then one has warrant for believing that, if one does *a*, one will also do *b* and *c*, but not that, if one does *d*, one will also do *e* and *f*.
4. Therefore, if one intends to bring about X rather than Y, one will have some reason to do *a*, and no reason to do *d*.

The conclusion entails that, in this case, if one intends to bring about X rather than Y, this establishes that one has more reason to do what is necessary for X than one has to do what is

necessary for Y.¹³ And the problem is that this argument seems to prove too much. For it is valid even if one has significantly stronger reasons to bring about Y as opposed to X. But arguably, we should not accept that, where one faces a choice between two competing ends, one will have more reason to take the means toward the end one happens to choose, regardless of whether that was the right choice (in the sense of being a choice one had sufficient reason to make).

The argument against the more radical form of bootstrapping, discussed §1, applies to this more moderate form as well. If one's decisions should be guided and constrained by an assessment of the values or reasons that bear on the alternatives, then whether one has sufficient reasons for a given option cannot itself depend on which choice one makes. We might put the point this way: To the extent that one is in doubt about whether one has sufficient reason to do what one believes to be necessary for achieving one's end, one should, to that extent, be in doubt about whether one has sufficient reason to pursue that end. And if one remains unreasonably steadfast in one's commitment to the end, this should not be allowed, by itself, to answer one's doubts about the adequacy of one's reasons to do what is necessary for that end.

If this is right, then we should reject the predictive account of the role of intention in means-end reasoning. In saying this, however, I do not mean to deny that our intentions ground expectations about our own future behavior.¹⁴ The problem is not with the assumption that intentions *have* predictive significance.¹⁵ The problem is with the idea that in general a person may rely on her belief that she will act in certain ways, where this belief itself rests on her intention to pursue a particular aim, in order to determine whether she has sufficient reason to do what is necessary for achieving that very aim.

5. A Different Approach

I want now to propose a different sort of role for the agent's intentions and commitments in an account of instrumental justification—one that, I will argue, does not sign off on bootstrap reasoning of a kind we should find objectionable.

I think the difficulties we have encountered so far are primarily due to an assumption about the *objects* of practical reasons—that is, about what practical reasons are reasons for. On the standard picture, principles of practical reason identify considerations that, given the circumstances, support (or oppose) certain types of action, where the action-types are individuated independently of the aims or purposes an agent might have in performing them.

If we try to fit instrumental reasons into this framework, we will be looking for some feature that favors certain options available to an agent over others, where the options are specified independently of the ends for the sake of which they might be chosen. What are the possible candidates for such a feature? So far, we've considered three: The instrumental-reason-giving feature of an act might be (1) being necessary for achieving an end the agent intends to achieve (2) being necessary for achieving an end the agent has some *reason* to achieve; or (3) being likely (given what else the agent intends to do) to contribute to the achievement of an end the agent has some reason to achieve. And we've seen that all three proposals are problematic. What I want to suggest is that, rather than trying to further refine the account of the relevant reason-giving feature, we drop the assumption that what we are looking for are reason-giving features of end-neutral act types. That is, we should reject the idea that instrumental justification is a matter of supplying a reason that could serve to justify selecting one option over others, where the available options are characterized independently of the ends or purposes for which they might be chosen.

Let's consider, therefore, a principle that takes a different form:

(N): If one has a reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing is necessary for one's ϕ -ing, then one has a reason to *ψ -in-order-to- ϕ* .¹⁶

The thought here is that, in considering a possible act and asking whether one would be justified in taking it, one must not only consider the objective or external features of the act but also the intention with which one would be doing it. In a sense, this just makes explicit what is already implicit in the idea that an instrumental reason is a reason to take some means to an end. To describe an act as a *means* is to describe it in a way that is not independent of the intention with which it is performed. My suggestion is that instrumental reasons are reasons for actions understood as means in this sense.

6. Motivating the End-Relative-Options Approach

In this section I consider some of the main theoretical advantages of the kind of approach illustrated by (N). In the next section, I'll consider how the account can be extended to cover reasons for means that are not strictly necessary for the relevant ends.

First, the account easily avoids the sort of pointlessness objection I raised against the pure anti-psychologistic approach. The fact that it would be nice to see my friend Gilly does not give me a reason to walk north, regardless of whether I intend to see her. What (N) tells me is that the fact that it would be nice to see Gilly is a reason to walk north *as a means* to seeing her. And this reflects how we actually make use of instrumental considerations in practical reasoning. Insofar as I take the fact that it would be nice to see my friend into account in considering whether to walk north, it must be because I am considering whether to do so as part of an overall plan of action culminating in an afternoon with Gilly. One would not normally enter into a deliberation about whether to walk in a particular direction without some conception of the point of doing so. Hence, if, as it happens, I've decided to go see the Van Gogh rather than visit Gilly, and am working out which direction to walk, the practical question will instead be framed in something like the following way: "Should I walk north or south *to get to the Art Institute?*" Since the Art Institute is to the south, walking north would, given my current plans, be

pointless (I'll just have to turn around). Moreover, the fact that it would be nice to see Gilly gives me no reason to *walk-north-in-order-to-see-the-Van-Gogh-exhibit*. All of this is consistent with my having some reason to *walk-north-in-order-to-visit-Gilly*. It's just that the latter is not what I would be doing were I to walk north.

One might ask, if I have a reason to *walk-north-in-order-to-visit-Gilly*, doesn't it follow that I have a reason to walk north? If so, it could be argued that the problem I raised for the normative transmission principle in §3 remains even if we substitute the end-relative principle (N). But such a claim would be misleading, at best. If my reason to *walk-north-in-order-to-visit-Gilly* gives me a reason to walk north, *simpliciter*, this is only insofar as my act of walking north would be an instance of *walking-north-in-order-to-visit-Gilly*. It would not give me a reason to walk north if that would be pointless (as it would be if my intention is to go to the Art Institute rather than to see my friend).

An analogy will help. Suppose the fact that the meeting starts at 9am gives a you reason to get to the office a few minutes before 9. Does this imply that you have a reason to get to the office some time before noon? In one sense, it does, since arriving a few minutes before 9am entails arriving sometime before noon. But it would be misleading to describe the content of the reason provided by the fact that the meeting starts at 9 as providing a reason to get to the office sometime before noon. That would seem to imply, falsely, that you would act in conformity with that reason if you arrived at the office at 11. Similarly, the fact that it would be nice to see my friend gives me a reason to walk north only in the sense that it gives me a reason to walk north *in order to see her*. That is the only way of walking north that would accord with the reason.

This brings me to a second motivation for (N): an argument from the rationalizing role of reasons. The principle of instrumental reason I've proposed concerns normative reasons for action. But it is frequently and plausibly held that the question of which considerations constitute normative reasons for an agent is closely tied to questions about what would make sense of or rationalize the

agent's actions.¹⁷ Saying exactly what the connection is is a tricky task. But suppose we accept a relatively modest characterization along the following lines: If R is a (normative) reason for S to ϕ in circumstances C, and S ϕ 's in C on the basis of R, then citing the fact that S was motivated by R will, other things equal, help to make sense of—i.e., rationalize—S's ϕ -ing in C.

If we accept some such explanatory constraint on what counts as a genuine reason for a person to perform some action, this will support construing instrumental reasons as reasons for options partly individuated by the ends for which they might be chosen. To see this, suppose I am walking north, and am asked why I am walking that way. I answer, "Because that is the only way to get to my friend Gilly's house, and it would be nice to spend the afternoon with her." Unless we add more (perhaps strange) details about my situation, this answer will help to make sense of my walking north only if I am walking north *in order to* spend the afternoon with Gilly. If it were revealed I had no intention of visiting Gilly, my answer could only leave my inquisitor baffled. The fact that I have a reason to visit Gilly (that it would be nice see her), and that I cannot visit her unless I walk north, does not meet the rationalizability constraint with respect to the mere act of walking north. It will not, on its own, help to rationalize my opting to walk north, regardless of my further intentions. Thus, if we accept the rationalizability constraint, we should deny that it provides a normative reason for me, in my circumstances, to walk north, *simpliciter*. By contrast, the fact that I cannot visit Gilly without walking north (and that it would be nice to see her) will, other things equal, help to make sense of my *walking-north-in-order-to-visit-Gilly*. The claim, therefore, that it would provide a reason to do *that* is compatible with the rationalizability requirement.

A third, related motivation for (N) concerns the role that instrumental reasons can play in the justification of omissions.¹⁸ Suppose there are strong moral reasons for me to participate in a protest against an unjust government policy. But imagine that participating in the protest would make it

impossible for me to visit my mother in the hospital, something I have (at least) equally good reason to do. Surely, the fact that I cannot visit my ailing mother unless I skip the protest will not go any way toward justifying my failure to participate if my purpose in skipping the protest is so that I can stay home and watch reruns of *Seinfeld*. Rather, what it could help to justify is my skipping the protest in order to be with my mother.¹⁹

One might reply that this argument misses its mark. The fact that I cannot both join the protest and visit my mother would indeed have justified my skipping the protest had I in fact acted for that reason. What my staying home to watch *Seinfeld* shows, however, is just that I did not skip the protest for that, or any other, good reason.

But this reply helps itself to an assumption that cannot be taken for granted in this context. Why, after all, should we think that my staying home to watch TV shows that I have failed to act on the basis of the reasons that justify skipping the protest? After all, suppose I *tell* you that part of the reason I did not participate in the protest was that if I had, it would not have been possible for me to visit my mother in the hospital. You would no doubt find this explanation disingenuous. But why is this the right reaction? The account of instrumental reasons I have offered suggests a straightforward explanation of this. The fact that I have good reason to go to my mother in the hospital, and that I cannot do that if I go to the protest, does not give me a good reason merely to skip the protest, leaving it open whether I skip it in order to go to my mother, or for some other purpose. And so I cannot intelligibly appeal to that reason in attempting to justify my decision not to join the protest if that decision was itself made with the aim of watching television.

A final motivation for the proposed account of instrumental reasons is that it supports a plausible role for intention and planning in practical reasoning, while avoiding the concerns about bootstrapping discussed above.

First, it should be clear that (N) does not allow one to create (or strengthen), by way of one's

will, reasons for oneself to act in furtherance of an end one has no good reason to pursue. As with the normative transmission account introduced in §2, one has a reason to take the means to an end only if one has some reason to adopt the end in the first place. Thus, it is only because I have some reason to take in the Van Gogh exhibit that I have any reason to walk down Michigan Ave in order to see it. The difference between the two accounts does not lie in what they identify as the grounds of instrumental justification, but rather in how we are to specify the options on which instrumental reasons bear.

At the same time, (N) supports an attractive view of the role that intentions play in practical reasoning. To see this, it will help to consider a slightly different version of the problem confronting the pure normative transmission view. If I intend to spend the day at the Art Institute, and yet walk north across the river, it seems I've made some sort of practical error. Moreover, the mistake seems to be one of performance—a way in which my action is against reason. It is not merely a problem with the combination of intentions I house in my head. Walking north in this context amounts to going in the *wrong direction*. On the anti-psychologistic view, however, it's not clear how to explain this condemnation of my contrary-to-intention behavior. For, according to that view, I have just as much reason to go north as I have to go south, regardless of where ultimately I intend to end up.

Certain normative judgments about a person's action appear, therefore, to be directly dependent on the person's actual intentions. One of the things that makes the idea that intentions are themselves a source of reasons for action seem so natural is that it affords a straightforward explanation of such normative assessments.

But if we combine the present approach to instrumental reasons (N) with some plausible assumptions about the nature of intention, we can provide a less problematic explanation. Begin with some familiar ideas about intentions. On Bratman's view, for instance, the role of intentions,

and the larger plans they components of, is to serve as a framework for deliberation. In particular, intentions function to pose certain deliberative problems that call for the agent's attention, and in so doing support a standard of relevance for options to be considered.²⁰ Thus, if I intend to see the Van Gogh, and my intention is not up for reconsideration, it will shape my conception of the deliberative problem I face under the circumstances. Here I am at a crossroads, I need to figure out which direction to walk to get to the museum. In light of this, the immediate options to be considered will be considered *as* potential solutions to this problem. Thought of in this way, the relevant options are, walk-north-to-get-to-the-Art-Institute, or walk-south-to-get-to-the-Art-Institute. But if we restrict ourselves to this specification of the relevant options, the necessity of walking south, if I'm ever to get to the Art Institute, will appear decisive. This explains the normative judgment that, given my prior intention, and assuming it is not up for reconsideration, if I were to go north, I would be going in the wrong direction. The reason is that, from the point of view of my deliberation—as structured by my intention to see the Van Gogh exhibit—the options that are salient to me are restricted in the way just described. This means that if I choose to walk north, I will be choosing to walk-north-to-get-to-the-Art-Institute. And this is clearly the wrong choice to make.

Note that this explanation goes beyond merely appealing to an incoherence in my mental states. It vindicates the intuition that the error would be at least in part an error in performance. My mistake would be to opt for an alternative—walking-north-to-get-to-the-Art-Institute—for which there was no reason. A principle like (N) thus allows us to preserve the intuitive idea that what a person intends to do regularly makes a difference to the justification of her conduct. This does not require us to see her intention as a source of reasons for action. Instead, we can appeal to a more refined notion of what instrumental reasons are reasons *for*. An agent will only be acting as she has some instrumental reason to act if she does what she does with the intention ultimately of achieving the end she has reason to pursue.

7. Extending the Account

In practice, much of our means-end reasoning is concerned with courses of action that are not strictly necessary, but are among several possible alternative means of achieving some end. I want to consider how we might extend the idea behind (N) to provide an account of instrumental reasons for unnecessary means.

Let's begin with sufficient means. The simplest extension would be just to hold that if an agent, S, has a reason to ϕ , and ψ -ing would be sufficient for S to ϕ , then S has a reason to ψ -in-order-to- ϕ .

But this needs refinement. For instance, suppose I have a reason to give a toast at my brother's wedding. Technically, my making a certain speech at such and such time and place and then doing the Worm later on the dancefloor would be sufficient for this. But my reason to give a toast at the wedding does not ground a reason make the speech *and* do the Worm on the dancefloor.²¹ Doing the Worm is entirely superfluous to the end of giving the wedding toast. So a better statement of the principle would be

(S): If (i) S has a reason to ϕ in circumstances C, (ii) A is a possible²² course of action that would be sufficient for S to ϕ in C, and (iii) A contains no superfluous elements, then S has a reason to perform-A-in-order-to- ϕ .

(S) employs the notions of a course of action and its elements. The elements in a course of action are themselves actions.²³ And an element is superfluous if S could omit that element and equally well achieve the end of ϕ -ing by performing the other elements of A on their own.

Now, since the elements of a course of action are actions, this formulation raises a further

issue. We also need an account of the instrumental reasons that bear on the individual elements that make up a course of action that is sufficient for realizing a worthwhile end.

Suppose I have good reason to express my gratitude to you for helping me out of a jam. One way of doing that (not the only way) might be to take you out to a nice meal. An element of that, let's suppose, is for me to make a dinner reservation. Making a reservation is not necessary for expressing my gratitude (I could send you a card rather than take you to dinner). Nor is it sufficient on its own. So neither (N) nor (S) will apply directly. But if we put them together, we get the following account. The course of action that includes, as elements, making a reservation, meeting you at the restaurant, paying for your meal, etc., is, we are assuming, sufficient for expressing my gratitude to you. Hence (S) implies that I have some reason to perform that particular course of action in order to express my gratitude. And since making a reservation is (logically) necessary if I am to perform that particular course of action, (N) implies that I have a reason to do that in order to treat you to a nice meal and thereby express my gratitude. Generalizing, we get:

(INS): If S has a reason to ϕ in circumstances C, and S's doing ψ is a non-superfluous element in a possible course of action, A, the performance of which (by S) would be sufficient for S's ϕ -ing in C, then S has a reason to ψ -in-order- ϕ -by-way-of-A.²⁴

We wanted to know what to say about cases where one has a reason to achieve some end and there are multiple courses of action available by which one could do this (as there almost always are, if the end is achievable at all). The basic idea, then, is that for each of these different ways of achieving the end, what one has a (*pro tanto*) reason to do in virtue of this is to take each of the steps involved in that course of action with the intention of performing the larger course of action, and all this in order to achieve the end in question.

Notice that (INS) entails both (N) and (S). First, if an act is strictly necessary for achieving some end, then it will be an element in every possible course of action which is sufficient for

achieving that end. Second, an acknowledgement that one has a reason to perform every element in a course of action with the intention of performing all them in order to achieve some end would, it seems, just amount to an acknowledgement that one has a reason to perform the whole course of action in order to achieve that end. (INS) therefore provides a general account of instrumental reasons.

We can extend the basic idea further. Reasoning about means often takes the form, not just of figuring out what is necessary and sufficient for achieving a given end, but of selecting between different ways of achieving a single end. Considerations of efficiency and risk enter at this point. But to make sense of many of these considerations as bearing on the selection of means, we need to understand the alternatives in an end-relative way. For example, the fact that you will get to work faster if you drive than if you walk may provide a reason for you to take your car this morning—but only if you're intending to go to work. More precisely, since it often appears that a consideration counts as a reason for some option only in relation to certain alternatives, we should presumably say that the fact that driving will get you to work faster than walking is a reason for you to take the car in order to get to work rather than set off on foot in order to get to work.²⁵ This fact would not be a reason to take the car in order to get to work rather than set off on foot in order to go to the park. And it will likewise be completely irrelevant to the question of whether to take the car or to walk in order to get to the movie theater (although the fact that driving a faster way to get to the theater might be relevant).

I do not have anything like a principle to produce here. But it seems clear that many considerations—e.g., efficiency, effectiveness—provide reasons that bear on the selection of means *qua* means to a particular end. But an action will constitute a *means* to an end only if it is undertaken with that end in view. In considering the content of such reasons—what they are reasons for—we therefore cannot abstract from the ends for the sake of which the relevant actions would be performed.

8. An Objection

In this section I will consider an objection, which is adapted from an objection to certain related views about the role of intention in determining moral permissibility. Several philosophers have argued against the idea that an agent's intentions are relevant, in any direct way, to the permissibility of her actions. Their arguments may be thought to pose a problem for the account of instrumental reasons offered here.

A standard way of objecting to the thought that intentions matter to permissibility is to argue that it is the result of confusing two different questions. One is the question of whether it would be permissible for the agent to perform a certain action, under the circumstances. This is a question the agent might pose for herself, in deliberating about what to do. And it is answered by the morally relevant considerations that speak in favor of or against performing it. The second question is whether the agent's reasoning and decision reflects positively or negatively on her.²⁶ Perhaps it reveals a flaw in her character.²⁷ Once these two questions are clearly distinguished, however, many take it to be obvious that the agent's intentions are often relevant to the second, concerning the evaluation of the agent's reasoning or character, but are almost never relevant to the first—the question of permissibility proper.

The reason this seems obvious is that, given the kind of considerations that normally go into making a moral case for performing an action, it is hard to see how a change in what the agent intends in performing that action could itself undermine (or bolster) such a case. Consider the following example from Thomson. Imagine that it is possible to provide relief to a patient who is in great pain only by giving him a lethal dose of a certain drug. The patient is at the end of his life, and wants to be given the drug. Thomson asks whether it would matter if we supposed that, in giving the drug, the doctor would be intending, not to relieve the patient's pain, but to hasten his death out of revenge for some past slight. Would the permissibility of giving the drug turn on the doctor's having such an

intention? Thomson thinks that would be absurd. “Surely,” she writes, “it should turn on the patient’s condition and wishes.”²⁸

Were the doctor to give the drug to the patient merely with the aim of causing his early death, this would show that there was something wrong with the doctor’s thinking about the patient and about what could justify bringing about his death. However, Thomson suggests, none of that has any bearing on whether the relief to the patient and the fact that he has consented to have the drug administered is enough to overcome the normal moral presumption against causing a person’s death.

This argument might be thought to apply to the account of instrumental reasons developed above. For don’t we encounter the same absurdity if we hold that the good of relieving the patient’s pain gives the doctor a reason to do what is necessary for that—namely, give the drug—only if she would give it with the intention of providing relief? And isn’t that what my view commits us to?

My response is that this objection mischaracterizes the end-relative-options approach. My view is not that one has a reason to do what is necessary for a good end *only if* one does it with the intention of achieving that end. This formulation makes the intention a condition on the agent’s having a reason to perform an act, which is not itself characterized in terms of its aim. If that were the view, then, if the doctor lacked the intention to provide relief, we would simply have to say that she had no reason to give the drug. And that seems implausible. The view I have defended, however, gives a different role to the agent’s intentions. They are not mere conditions of the normative transmission of reasons. They are included as components of what the agent has reason to do. So, regardless of what the doctor’s intentions actually are, she has good reason to give-the-drug-in-order-to-provide-relief.

But what if the doctor would in fact give the drug merely in order to see the patient dead; doesn’t it follow from my account that she would then have no reason to give the drug? Well, it’s true that the reason provided by patient’s need for relief is not, on my view, a reason simply to give the drug. And it’s also true that, if the doctor gives the drug merely in order to see the patient dead, then

she will not have done the thing she had reason to do. Still, if she does do what the patient's condition gives her good reason to do, she will give the patient the drug. As long as we are clear about all of this—and don't focus so narrowly on the question, "Does she have a reason to give the drug, or not?"—then it seems to me these results are in no way puzzling or counterintuitive.

9. Conclusion

Sound instrumental reasoning must in some way take account of the ends one actually intends to pursue. To think otherwise is to think that one may have instrumental reasons to do what one recognizes would be entirely pointless. At the same time, it is a mistake to think that, in forming an intention to pursue a given end, one thereby gives oneself new or stronger reasons to do what is required for achieving it.

I have argued that the difficulty here comes from an impoverished conception of what instrumental reasons are reasons for. The reasons to pursue an end ground reasons to take the means to that end, but only insofar as the relevant means are understood and undertaken *as* means to the end in question. What an instrumental reason is a reason for, in other words, is not an act considered on its own; it is a reason for an action performed for the sake of an end.

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NOTES

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¹ The bootstrapping problem was initially raised by Michael Bratman (1981, 1987). See also Broome (1999, 2001) and, for an especially thorough discussion, Brunero (2007).

² Cf. Schroeder (2005).

³ Note that one need not be a realist about reasons or values to accept this argument. One could, for example, think that the value of a given pursuit depends on the way in which it serves the agent's desires or preferences, while viewing this as independent of whether one actually intends to pursue it. This appears to be Bratman's view. See Bratman (1987).

⁴ In thinking about the independence of normative reasons from the attitudes of a person on which those reasons bear, I have learned a much from A.J. Julius's work. See Julius (forthcoming).

⁵ Cf. Scanlon (2004), Kolodny (2011).

⁶ Something which is controversial -- see Kolodny (2005, 2008), Raz, 2011).

⁷ See, for example, Broome (1999, 2001, 2013), Kolodny (2011, forthcoming); Scanlon (2004, 2007). There is controversy over both how to formulate rational requirements of means-end coherence (whether they have wide or narrow scope, for example), and about whether such requirements are genuinely normative. For additional contributions to these debates, see Brunero (2010); Lord (2013, 2014); Raz (2005, 2011); Schroeder (2004); Shpall (2013); Way (2010). I will set aside these controversies. My argument against the normative transmission account of instrumental reasons does not depend on what we should take to be the best view rationality to pair with this account.

⁸ cf. Brunero (2007).

⁹ Brunero (2007), Kolodny (2011).

¹⁰ Kolodny (forthcoming) (emphasis added). Kolodny ultimately qualifies this principle so that it applies only on the condition that the reason to E is not itself explained by an application of the principle with respect to some further end, E'. See his discussion of the "General Transmission" principle (GM). The reasons for this qualification need not concern us here. Note, also, that this principle is not restricted to necessary means. Nevertheless, for Kolodny, even strictly necessary means must "probabilize" the end. And I will continue for now to focus on this case.

¹¹ Kolodny (2011), p. 55. See Scanlon (2008), Ch. 2.

¹² See Kolodny (2011), p. 56.

¹³ Since you have at least *a* reason, rather than no reason. As noted, the argument has been simplified for expository purposes. In particular, I have assumed that one has a reason to do *a* (or *d*) only if one has warrant to believe that one will do the other things necessary for achieving the relevant end. On Kolodny's view, however, all that would be required is a *positive probability* that one will perform the other actions required. Presumably there is some non-zero probability that one will perform, say, actions *e* and *f* even if one does not now intend to do so (and even if one should, all things considered, believe one will not do so). Hence, even where there is no intention, there is likely be *some* reason for one to perform *d*. But Kolodny also holds that the strength of the reasons provided will partly depend on what this probability is. And absent an intention to bring about Y, the probability is presumably pretty low that one will do *e* and *f*. In that case, as long as the reasons to bring about Y rather than X are not *very* great, we will still get the conclusion that, in some cases of this kind, one's intention to

bring about X can make it so that one has more reason to take the necessary means to X than to take the necessary means to Y, despite having more reason to adopt Y as one's end. It is this bootstrapping effect of one's intention to bring about X in the face of decisive reasons in favor of Y that I object to.

¹⁴ Or perhaps an intention simply is a kind of expectation or belief about one's future behavior. For different accounts of the relation between an agent's intentions and her beliefs about what she will do, see, for example, Bratman (1999); Grice (1971); Marušić (2015); Paul (2009); Setiya (2007); Velleman (1989).

¹⁵ Thus, my objection to the predictive account is not the one Kolodny responds to in §6 of his (2011).

¹⁶ One qualification: The principles I defend here may be read as defeasible. In some cases, a means of achieving a worthwhile may be ruled out on moral grounds, or because they would be in some way inconsistent with the values supporting the end in the first place. In such cases, the *pro tanto* reason identified by the principle may not just be outweighed, but its normative force may be undercut entirely. For a classic discussion of the undercutting or "silencing" effect of moral considerations, see McDowell (1998).

¹⁷ For a particularly illuminating recent discussion of this connection, see Raz (2011). As is standard in contemporary philosophical writing on action and practical reason, my use of "rationalize" does not carry the pejorative connotations of its everyday use.

¹⁸ For a related point, see White (forthcoming).

¹⁹ The point, in case it's not obvious, is not that watching *Seinfeld* is not the kind of thing that could justify skipping an important political protest (I leave that to the critics). The point is that the incompatibility of attending the protest and visiting your mother in the hospital cannot justify skipping the protest if your plan is not to go to your mother, but to watch *Seinfeld* reruns.

²⁰ Bratman (1987).

²¹ Kolodny (forthcoming).

²² I.e., possible for S, given her circumstances.

²³ If there are basic actions—actions that one can do immediately, and not by doing other things—then there could in principle be ends achievable through the performance of a single basic act. (S) should be read to cover this possibility as well, despite the artificiality of talking about a basic action as a "course" of action, albeit one that includes only a single element. For an argument, however, that there are no basic actions in this sense, see Lavin (2013).

²⁴ Again, (INS) should be read as a defeasible principle. Where the conditions of (INS) are met, this establishes a *prima facie* reason for S to ψ . Under certain conditions, however, it may turn out not to provide a genuine reason for S to ψ . See note 17.

²⁵ Cf. Sinnott-Armstrong (2006) and Snedegar (2013) on the view (known as “contrastivism” about reasons) that all reasons for action are relativized to a set of alternatives.

²⁶ See, especially, Scanlon’s (2008) distinction between “deliberative” and “critical” uses of moral principles. Cf. Thomson (1991).

²⁷ Thomson (1999).

²⁸ Thomson (1999) p. 515. Actually, at this point in the article, Thomson is discussing legal permissibility. But she later applies the same point to the topic of moral permissibility.

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