

Deliberation and Acting for Reasons

Theoretical and practical deliberation are voluntary activities, and like all voluntary activities they can be carried out reasonably or unreasonably. As a consequence, there must be processes that are non-deliberative and non-voluntary but that nonetheless allow us to respond to reasons, and that these processes generate the voluntary activities making up ordinary deliberation.¹

1. The Nature of Deliberation

Deliberation is commonly divided into theoretical and practical deliberation. Theoretical deliberation is concerned with what to believe, while practical deliberation is concerned with what to do. The product of theoretical deliberation is a new belief.² The product of practical deliberation is perhaps a new intention, or perhaps a new belief that a certain course of action would be best overall.³

Both sorts of deliberation are kinds of actions.⁴ They are mental actions or perhaps mental actions conducted with supplementary non-mental aids (notepaper, calculators, reference information, the sound of one's own voice speaking one's thoughts aloud, other people...). We

We would like to thank [removed for refereeing].

¹ The general topic of interest to us has been treated by a number of philosophers (including one of the authors of the present work). See, e.g., Author (2003), which touches briefly on the issue, Dreier (2001), which deals in depth with a related issue, and Railton (2004; 2009), in which the first steps of the present argument are taken.

² Or a retrenchment of an existing belief, or a change in the credence of a belief, or something similar. And likewise, practical deliberation might result in things other than intentions (choices, plans...) or things other than new beliefs in what is best (retrenchment of existing beliefs in what is best, changes in the credences of existing beliefs about what is best...).

³ For our purposes, it is not important what, exactly, the product of either sort of deliberation is, so long as the above proposals are not radically misguided.

⁴ For other instances of this claim, see, e.g., Hookway (1999) on epistemic deliberation. Railton (2009) on practical deliberation.

will, however, focus on the mental aspect of deliberation, as mixed cases do not alter the plausibility of the conclusions for which we will press.⁵ Purely mental deliberation, then, is a purely mental activity, carried out by means of performing various mental *actions* aimed at some suitable *end*.

For a mental activity to be deliberation, it must be aimed at determining what to think or what to do. A mental activity aimed only at amusing the subject is not deliberation. A mental activity aimed only at facilitating sleep is not deliberation. Determining what to think or what to do is thus a constitutive end of deliberation, in the same way that getting coffee is a constitutive end of going for coffee.

Deliberation must also be carried out by means of particular mental acts: bringing to consciousness various ideas or images.⁶ There are other ways to determine what to do or what to believe, but these are not deliberation. As a person with the aim of determining what to do, Mary might be aware that she will come to be resolved on what to do if she can just enter a state of meditative tranquility. And it might well be true that entering this state is a mental act that Mary can perform, aiming through it to determine what to do. But Mary would not be deliberating.

Even mental acts that bring ideas or images to mind with the goal of determining what to do through filling one's consciousness with them are not guaranteed to be acts of deliberation. Perhaps Randa finds that what to believe about a difficult matter comes quickly to her if she visualizes her fourth-grade teacher sternly asking her, "And what is the answer, Randa?" This would not make her use of such an image into an act of deliberation. Deliberation also requires that one bring to mind ideas or images that have, or are meant to have, some justificatory relation to the propositions that would be the conclusion of one's deliberation.

⁵ We should note, if only in passing, the existence of arguments that there is no principled difference between "purely" mental actions and "mixed cases." See, e.g., Clark and Chalmers (1998).

⁶ Including auditory images, gustatory images, etc.

Consider Harold, who is deliberating about whether to promise to meet his son in Calgary. Harold engages in a mental action known colloquially as ‘searching his memory’ for potentially conflicting promises, a process that itself might involve the mental act of holding in mind the idea of Tuesday, but might not even involve that so much as an effortful attentiveness in Harold’s present context. This mental act will produce a notable nothing in consciousness or some idea or image tied to a competing promise. See on this scale, deliberation is often a far cruder process than the valid deductions philosophers enjoy. It is common for the process of deliberation to throw up a fragment – for example, Harold might suddenly say to himself, “oh, the planning council!” – rather than a complete set of propositions⁷ entailing the conclusion – I can’t go to Calgary on Tuesday – that is, nonetheless, reached on the basis of the fragment.

Following the consequences of this simple account of deliberation leads to a surprising result: that deliberation does not, in any way, ground our responsiveness to reasons.

2. Deliberation and Responding to Reasons

Deliberation is a mental action. Thus, like any action, we would expect deliberation to be more or less reasonable or unreasonable on any given occasion.⁸ Sometimes, deliberating would be smart, reasonable, or rational,⁹ and sometimes it would be stupid, unreasonable, or irrational. Furthermore, even when it is rational to deliberate in general, a person can deliberate in a specific way that is rational or in a way that is downright foolish.

To see the possibility of both sorts of irrational deliberation, consider some cases.

⁷ Such as, (a) that I am going to the council on Tuesday, (b) that if I am going to go to the council on Tuesday then I cannot meet my son on Tuesday, and therefore (c) that I cannot meet my son on Tuesday.

⁸ Compare our arguments on this over the next few paragraphs to, e.g., Joseph Raz, who expresses the view that “Reason is inherently normative” (Raz 1999, 68).

⁹ We take a rational person to be a person who acts as she does for very good reasons and thinks as she does for very good reasons; we also take it that intuitions about being smart or stupid, reasonable or unreasonable, are relevant to claims about rationality and irrationality.

First consider a case in which it is irrational to deliberate, and yet one deliberates. Rebecca deliberates on whether she should really be getting off the Interstate at exit 33, ignoring the fact that she and her car are already on the offramp for exit 33 and situated in swift-moving traffic. The rational thing for Rebecca to do is surely to drive first and deliberate later, perhaps once she has reached a calm surface street. Deliberating at just that moment is irrational.

The second sort of case is that in which the agent is rational to deliberate in general, but in which the particular deliberative acts taken by the agent are irrational. Consider, for example, wishful thinking. In wishful thinking, it often happens that the deliberator dwells disproportionately on the evidence that support the conclusion she would like to believe and not on the evidence against it. Suppose that Katie begins to consider the grammaticality of the phrase ‘I’m loving’. If she searches her memory for different uses of the phrase, she is probably proceeding reasonably. Calling to mind a pop song, an advertising campaign, and sentences uttered by different people will bring to consciousness evidence that the phrase has widespread use, and this is worthwhile evidence to consider when determining what to think about a phrase’s grammaticality: in conservative circles the verb ‘to love’ is not used in the progressive, but there might be a linguistic change in progress. But suppose that Katie begins to consider ways to express ongoing enjoyment of something without using the phrase ‘I’m loving’. She calls to mind the phrases ‘I’ve been enjoying,’ ‘I’m relishing’, and others. She says to herself, “no one needs to say he’s loving something.” Perhaps she finds the phrase “I’m loving” distasteful, and her emotions about it are influencing her effort to determine what to believe about grammar. If she proceeds in this way, it seems that Katie’s deliberation is now proceeding unreasonably. After all, the existence of another way to say much the same thing as ‘I’m loving’ is no evidence one way or the other regarding the grammaticality of ‘I’m loving’ itself. As Katie is perfectly well aware, a phrase can be grammatical even though it is also optional as a means of expressing some idea. Given that her goal is to determine what to think about the grammaticality of the phrase ‘I’m loving’, she has taken a wrong turn.¹⁰

¹⁰ A valuable discussion of sources of irrational thought is found in Lazar (1999).

So some acts of deliberation are more reasonable or rational than others. This is important but does not yet go far enough. Acts of deliberation can be not only closer to or further from what the reasonable or rational person would have done but also actions performed for good or bad reasons. When one acts for a reason one does not simply act or believe *in accordance* with the reason: one's accordance with the reason is a result of the fact that one is acting *for* the reason. Thus, consider Kiyoshi. It might be rational for Kiyoshi to turn on his television, because there is a program he enjoys that has just started, and this is a good moment for a pleasant diversion. But Kiyoshi could have done what is reasonable entirely by accident: he has a bad habit of turning on his television when he walks in the door, and it was that habit he was acting on rather than his good reasons. He could also have turned on the television because of the good reasons to turn it on. There is acting in accordance with one's reasons, and then there is the further step of acting *for* one's reasons. A crucial claim for our paper is that what is true of turning on the television is also true of deliberation. It could be reasonable for Katie to call to mind the advertising campaign based on the phrase 'I'm loving it' when deliberating about whether the phrase is grammatical. But she could call it to mind, not because of whatever it is that makes it reasonable to do so (i.e., not for the right reasons), but because she has been thinking about the advertising campaign off and on for a week, for a course on marketing, and so would have called to mind the campaign regardless of its relevance – "just out of stupid habit." If so, then Katie would have done a reasonable or rational thing, but not have done it for the reasons there are to do so.

Mental actions making up occasions of deliberation are sometimes taken for excellent reasons, and other times are taken for rather poor reasons. We see two possible explanations. According to the first, the mental actions making up deliberation are actions taken for reasons (to the extent that they are) because of some non-voluntary, non-deliberative process that generates the mental actions in a way that is compatible with those mental actions being performed for reasons. This is the possibility we favor.¹¹ The other general possibility is that the mental actions making up deliberation are actions taken for good reasons (when they are) because of their relation to other acts of deliberation. In the remainder of this paper, we canvass this latter family of theories. We see the family as having three branches: mental acts of deliberation are

¹¹ See Author (2006) for a discussion.

actions taken for good reasons (when they are) because of their relations to previous acts of deliberation, because of their relations to present acts, or because of their relations to merely possible acts. We argue against each of these branches in turn.

3. Present Deliberation and its Relations to Other Acts of Deliberation

It might be suggested that one deliberates for reasons because of an appropriate relationship to a previous occasion of deliberation. Call this approach 'Previous Deliberation'. In the past, perhaps, Harold engaged in some deliberation, at the end of which he embraced the principle that he should not make a promise without considering possible conflicting prior promises. And that is why, when he searches his memory for such promises, he not only does what he has reason to do but does it *for* a good reason. His present deliberating for reasons is constituted by his acting in accordance with the conclusion of previous deliberation about how to deliberate in such cases. Or, in a slightly more sophisticated vein, his present acting (i.e., his present searching of his memory) for reasons is constituted by his acting out of a habit, policy, or virtue that was engendered by his previous deliberative conclusion about how to deliberate.¹²

There are a number of problems with Previous Deliberation. It is far from clear that all people deliberating for good reasons have been so self-conscious as to have deliberated, in the past, about how to deliberate. Also problematic is the possibility of people who have embraced foolish principles constraining deliberation: e.g., to believe nothing in the future without *proof*; to do nothing without first asking how it will benefit *me*. People who manage to constrain their deliberation in these ways seem less reasonable, not more, when conforming to their chosen principles.

¹² The role of habit in making deliberation responsive to reasons is emphasized by, e.g., Hookway (1999) and Herman (1993). Hookway does not clearly endorse Previous Deliberation, however – perhaps as a result of having a slightly different framing of the issues from the one that concerns us. Railton (2009) also emphasizes the role of habit, but Railton is very clear that he rejects anything like Previous Deliberation.

At the heart of things, however, is a more foundational problem. Suppose that one act of deliberation is made to be an act taken for a (good or bad) reason, as Previous Deliberation requires, by a previous deliberative conclusion. That previous deliberative conclusion was reached through one or more acts of deliberation. Consider those acts of deliberation themselves. Were they themselves actions taken for reasons? As actions, they must be taken for *some* reason, whether a better one or a worse. What, then, made it true of the previous deliberative acts that they were taken for reasons? According to Previous Deliberation, it would have to be some prior act of deliberation. And so we are set off on a regress. Further, the regress is a vicious one, for no matter how far back in a deliberating agent's life we go, we must always find a prior act of deliberation in order to satisfy the theory. Previous Deliberation thus fails.

It might be suggested that one deliberates for a reason because of an appropriate relationship to another, simultaneous act of deliberation. Call this approach 'Present Deliberation'. A defender of Present Deliberation might hold that, as we reach deliberative conclusions, we also embrace the process by which we reach these conclusions. That is, each deliberative act contains, as it were, a second act of deliberation in which the first act is deliberated upon and found reasonable – and on this basis, the fact that the first act is performed for a (good) reason is established.¹³

Present Deliberation faces, if anything, even more serious objections than Previous Deliberation. To start, Present Deliberation requires an act of deliberation that is not phenomenologically familiar. At the very moment at which Harold consciously tries to call to mind competing promises that would prevent him from promising to meet his son in Calgary, he is not

¹³ Something like Present Deliberation is suggested by Christine Korsgaard's remarks about the role of recognizing one's reasons when acting for reasons. See Korsgaard (1997), and the critical discussion of this work in Railton (2009). Niko Kolodny seems to endorse something like Present Deliberation in writing that for a mental transition to happen for a reason, it must result from awareness of the justification for the transition (Kolodny 2005, 520). But in a footnote, Kolodny wants to allow that unconscious, automatic awareness is possible. Since there is no such thing (in our understanding) as unconscious awareness, perhaps Kolodny is actually more sympathetic to something like the view we sketch below in Section 5.

consciously evaluating the reasonableness of this conscious search of his memory. Further, Present Deliberation makes it unclear how an act of deliberation could be unreasonable so long as an agent is, at the moment of deliberation, subjectively content with the act. But such unreasonable acts of deliberation seem common enough: if Katie is deliberating about the grammaticality of 'I'm loving' and her deliberation has gone down an unreasonable path in which she is asking herself about all the alternatives that exist to that phrase, her subjective contentment with the course of her deliberation does not make it reasonable.

Present Deliberation, like Previous Deliberation, also begins a vicious regress. The second deliberative act required by Present Deliberation is itself capable of being performed for better or worse reasons (since it is an action), and so requires a third deliberative act in order for the second to be performed for reasons, and so on. The viciousness of this regress lies in its requirement that, to deliberate at all, an agent engage in infinitely many distinct acts of deliberation simultaneously, with each act having a distinct goal. Infinitely many implicit beliefs can, perhaps, be stored in a finite agent. But infinitely many distinct mental actions cannot be performed at the same time by finite agents.¹⁴

It might, in the light of the foregoing, be suggested that one deliberates for reasons because of an appropriate relationship to a merely possible occasion of deliberation. Call this approach 'Possible Deliberation'. Perhaps it is true that, were Harold to deliberate about it, Harold would conclude that he is being reasonable in trying to call to mind promises that might conflict with meeting his son in Calgary. And perhaps it is this fact about what conclusion he would have

¹⁴ A variant of Present Deliberation, suggested in conversation by Gil Harman, avoids the regress by means of self-reference. The suggestion is that acts of deliberation are undertaken for reasons just in case the act of deliberation judges itself to be reasonable, in addition to judging whatever else it judges. The content of e.g., Katie's deliberation might then be: there is an advertising campaign using the phrase 'I'm loving' and this is a reasonable thing to be considering. In addition to its phenomenological unfamiliarity, this suggestion has trouble explaining the possibility of unreasonable acts of deliberation that are not recognized as unreasonable by the deliberator. But it serves to remind us that we are only considering a limited number of alternatives, and we cannot pretend to exhaust the space of possibilities in doing so.

reached that makes it true that Harold's act of trying to call these promises to mind is indeed a reasonable act.¹⁵

Possible Deliberation, like its counterparts, faces a serious regress problem. Suppose it is true that, had Harold considered the reasonableness of calling to mind promises that might conflict with meeting his son in Calgary, he would have reached the (theoretical) conclusion that it would be reasonable of him to do so. Harold would have reached a conclusion: would he have reached it for a reason, or not? If Harold would have reached this conclusion for no reason at all, the fact that he would have reached it can hardly make his actual deliberative act more reasonable. So the supporter of Possible Deliberation must hold that Harold would have reached his theoretical conclusion about the reasonableness of calling to mind possible conflicts *for a reason*. And Possible Deliberation now applies again. If Harold would have reached his theoretical conclusion for a reason, then it must be true that, if Harold had deliberated about whether he had reason to reach the theoretical conclusion that he would have been reasonable to call to mind possible conflicts, he would have reached the theoretical conclusion that yes, he would have been reasonable to reach the theoretical conclusion that he would be reasonable to call to mind possible conflicts. And from here it just gets worse, as Harold must support ever-more baroque counterfactuals about what he would have reasoned about his reasoning about his reasoning about his reasoning ... about his reasoning about his calling to mind possible promises that would conflict with meeting his son in Calgary. At a certain point, Harold's ability to reason about reasoning about reasoning... will give out, because his abilities in this regard are finite, but the need for counterfactuals about how he would reason are not exhausted, for they are infinite. This is the viciousness of the regress.¹⁶

¹⁵ Possible deliberation would seem to be defended in McGreer and Pettit (2002, 294), on the assumption that believing for a (better or worse) reason is what makes one responsible for one's beliefs.

¹⁶ And it will not do to appeal to how Harold would ideally reason, because how he would ideally reason is via deliberative acts that would themselves be acts performed for reasons – acts that would themselves be reasonable – and so no appeal to ideal reasoning can be made in explicating what it is to deliberate for a reason on pain of ontological circularity.

Another problem with Possible Deliberation is independent of regresses, but also familiar from Present Deliberation and Past Deliberation: the facts about how someone would deliberate are sensitive to people's theories about how they ought to deliberate, even if these are foolish theories. Katie is, suppose, acting for good reasons when she says to herself, "lots of people seem to say 'I'm loving' without scare-quoting it or anything." She is trying to determine the grammaticality of the phrase, and saying this to herself is rehearsing relevant information, and she has said it to herself for the reason that it is relevant information. But suppose Katie has an unreasonable belief about good reasoning, believing that no piece of evidence is worth considering if it is not conclusive. In contexts in which she theorizes about how her reasoning should be conducted, this belief comes to the fore all the time. It seems to us that this scenario is possible. And yet, Possible Deliberation must say it is impossible, because the fact that Katie *would* reject her own deliberative act as unreasonable makes it true, according to Possible Deliberation, that her own deliberative act actually was unreasonable, and this is false. It goes against what seems the most natural interpretation of the case, which is that Katie can be reasonable in actuality while being counterfactually disposed to reject her own reasonableness.

Possible Deliberation is thus no more tenable than Previous or Present Deliberation.¹⁷

4. Conclusion

We conclude that acts of deliberation are in no way required for other acts of deliberation to be performed for reasons. And we take it that, if acts of deliberation are not required, no other acts are required: acts of deliberation were the only promising candidates from the realm of actions. So non-deliberative non-actions are required for acts of deliberation to be performed for reasons. The foundation of our capacity to act for reasons is itself non-deliberative and non-voluntary.

¹⁷ And with it we exhaust our imaginations. There are surely other ways to defend the claim that a deliberative act is performed for a reason just in case it bears the right relation to some other deliberative act. But we have covered the main options that seem worth covering, and have found no defense that succeeds.

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