

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
Prof. Funkhouser
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VPR, Chapters 19 & 20

“Anscombe on Practical Inference”

- Vogler recalls Anscombe’s “direction of fit” story in order to illustrate a distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning. Anscombe argues against *inferentialist* accounts of practical reasoning.

And, in Anscombe’s view, it is not so much that inferentialists have nothing to contribute to the study of practical reasoning as that they have no way of getting at the sense in which practical reasoning is practical. To get at *that*, one needs to explain such things as the fact that the detective’s list and the shopper’s list have distinct uses. Inferentialists try to capture what’s distinctive about practical inference by content restrictions on practical argument (e.g., the judgment that such-and-such action is desirable/required/called for — each of which suggests that the conclusion concerns some matter that the agent can affect by her act), together, sometimes, with insistence that one of the premises of a practical inference mention (at least one of) the reasoner’s ends or desires. Anscombe argues that such attempts fail. (438)

- Vogler criticizes Davidson’s suggestion, in an attempt to explain what it is for beliefs and desires to cause action in “the right way”, that intentional action must be the product of practical reasoning. Lots of intentional action isn’t the product of reasoning at all.
- I’ll skip Vogler’s discussion of the first inferentialist assumption.
- Practical reasoning takes time, and various contingencies can arise that would (and should) break an otherwise rational deliberative process. So, what counts as good practical reasoning is not determined simply by inferential relations among propositions.

Q: Does practical reasoning differ from theoretical reasoning in this regard?

- Anscombe argued that the premises and inferences used in practical reasoning do not have a distinctive content that distinguishes practical reasoning from theoretical reasoning.
- Premises about desires are no more appropriate (let alone necessary) for practical reasoning than premises about beliefs are appropriate for theoretical reasoning.
- Brandom, on a supposed similarity between practical reasoning and theoretical reasoning:

A commitment to make-true is an intention. A scorekeeping consequence is, in effect, an inferential consequence. Brandom sees no obvious distinction between “transmission” of belief in light of inferential consequences and “transmission” of intention in light of inferential consequences. Anscombe will insist upon a distinction. (460)

But Vogler objects:

Now, given a moment’s thought, I will *of course* predict that in walking to school, I will be wearing down my shoes. I will also be creating a breeze, casting shadows on the pavement, etc. Consequently, if I know these things, they belong among the “doxastic commitments” that I undertake upon being prepared to assert that I will walk to school today. They are *not* among the intended consequences of walking. I do not intend walking as one means among many I might take to wearing down my shoes. Wearing down my shoes isn’t a stage in some other proceeding I have undertaken. You can see this in part because it isn’t as though I will be “committed” to finding some *alternate* means of wearing down my shoes if the walk doesn’t do the trick. (460)

“Action, Norms, and Practical Reasoning”

- Brandom advances two ideas that are supposed to show how practical reasons are both reasons and causes. First:

The thought is that there are two species of discursive commitment: the cognitive (or doxastic), and the practical. The latter are commitments to *act*. Acknowledgments of the first sort of commitment correspond to *beliefs*; acknowledgments of the second sort of commitment correspond to *intentions*. The first are

takings-true, the second makings-true. Practical commitments are like doxastic commitments in being essentially inferentially articulated. (468)

Second:

The second basic idea motivating the present account is that the non-inferential relations between acknowledgments of practical commitments and states of affairs brought about by intentional *action* can be understood by analogy to the noninferential relations between acknowledgments of doxastic commitments and the states of affairs they are brought about by through conceptually contentful *perception*. (468)

◦ Note, especially, how Brandom takes beliefs and intentions as basic, rather than beliefs and desires.

- An inference can be *materially good*, even if not formally good.

Instead, we can treat inferences such as that from “Pittsburgh is to the West of Philadelphia”, to “Philadelphia is to the East of Pittsburgh”, or from “It is raining”, to “The streets will be wet”, as *materially good* inferences — that is inferences that are good because of the content of their *nonlogical* vocabulary. I propose to adopt this nonformalist strategy in thinking about practical inferences. (470)

See the examples given on p. 471, neither one of which is supposed to be an enthymeme.

- This sets up Brandom’s central thesis:

... normative vocabulary (including expressions of preference) makes explicit the endorsement (attributed or acknowledged) of MATERIAL proprieties of PRACTICAL reasoning. Normative vocabulary plays the same expressive role on the practical side that conditionals do on the theoretical side. (473)

This is illustrated for the normative terms ‘prefer’, ‘obliged’, and ‘ought’, by (a), (b), and (c). They are examples of prudential, institutional, and unconditional norms respectively.

The idea is that normative vocabulary is a kind of *logical* vocabulary, in my expressive sense: its expressive function is to make explicit commitments to inferences. (475)

◦ Notice how on Brandom’s model belief-like states, rather than desires, are prominent in practical reasoning.