

Practical Necessity

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Draft

§ 1 PRACTICAL DELIBERATION

- (i) We can begin to approach the notion of practical or volitional necessity through the consideration of practical deliberation.
 - (a) Practical deliberation refers to a kind of reflective consideration of the reasons one has for acting which on the basis of those reasons issues in a conclusion about how to act.
 - (b) Practical deliberation can thus be seen as providing an answer in particular cases to the question "What is to be done?" or "what should I do?," although we do not need to think of the deliberator as literally possessing this question to themselves in every instance of practical deliberation.
 - (c) The manner in which practical deliberation amounts to a weighing of reasons also does not need to be construed on a simplistic "hydraulic model" on which each reason for action has a weight that is straightforwardly summed with the other reasons for that actions, and the action with the highest sum is endorsed as the conclusion.
 - (d) It is enough to conceive of practical deliberation just as capable in some manner of comparing the reasons for one action with another.
- (ii) Practical deliberation is constrained by some notion of what is possible to for the agent to conclude as its outcome– that is, of what action it is possible for the agent to take. It is common to suppose that the options open to an individual as the possible outcomes of practical deliberation are constrained only by their rational features:
 - (a) If the individual is a poor practical deliberator but has otherwise sound rational capacities, then all this may amount to is that the conclusion of practical deliberation must be logically or physically possible.
 - (b) If the individual is not such a poor deliberator, then we will further expect the outcome to reflect the actual balance of reasons. That is, the outcome

of practical deliberation can only be what there is at least plausibly most reason to do.

- (c) If we construe the sense of reason here as one that requires those reasons to be publicly available, then we have an agent-neutral conception of practical deliberation on which what different agents will, in the same general circumstances and so long as they are good deliberators, reach the same conclusion about what there is most reason to do.
- (iii) However, it is not true that distinct agents must or will always reach the same conclusions in practical deliberation under like circumstances.
 - (a) One possibility is that internal features of the agent's psychology effect what reasons the agent has to consider in deliberation, i.e. that the character of the agent partly determines what counts as a reason for that agent.
 - (b) Let us set aside that possibility in order to focus on another manner in which agents may differ, *ceteris paribus*, in practical deliberation.
 - (c) This is that, regardless of the reasons in their favor, one agent may be incapable of taking an action that the other could, even if it were correctly endorsed as the conclusion of agent-neutral practical deliberation.
 - (d) What prevents the agent from taking this action is that acting as such is unthinkable for that agent.

§ 2 FRANKFURT

- (i) The idea that there are possible "rational" conclusions of practical deliberation that are not in fact live possibilities for the deliberator takes us to the negative side of practical necessity.¹

2.1 *The Importance of What We Care About*

- (i) Frankfurt points out that the disconnect is possible because practical deliberation issues in a decision about how to act, and a decision does not always amount to all that much, practically speaking.

The point is not that he might change his mind a moment after making his choice, or that he might immediately forget his decision. It is that he might be *unable* to carry out his intention. He might discover, when the chips are down, that he simply cannot bring himself to pursue the course of action upon which he has decided. Without changing his mind or forgetting anything, he

1. Frankfurt and Williams use the terms "volitional necessity" and "practical necessity" respectively. So far as I can tell, there is no difference in what they are meant to refer to, though there may be differences in Frankfurt and Williams' understanding of them. I prefer the later because of its more explicit connection with action and deliberation.

might find either that he is moved irresistibly to pursue the other course of action instead or that he is similarly constrained at least to forbear from the course he has chosen... That is, he might discover that he does not have and that he does not subsequently develop the feelings, attitudes, and interests constitutive of the sort of person which his decision has committed him to being (p. 85).

(ii) The trouble is that what the deliberator takes to be important plays no role in the agent neutral conception of deliberation, so it remains a possibility that deliberation will conclude in an action that conflicts with what the deliberator finds important.

- (a) What is important to an agent is at least in part determined by what it is that agent cares about.
- (b) In some cases, what a person cares about is entirely up to them. In other cases, it does not appear to be:

There are occasions when a person realizes that what he cares about matters to him not merely so much, but in such a way that it is impossible for him to forbear from a certain course of action... An encounter with necessity of this sort characteristically affects a person less by impelling him into a certain course of action than by somehow making it apparent to him that every apparent alternative to that course is unthinkable (p. 86).

(c) Frankfurt makes two points here:

- i. One is that the phenomenology of practical necessity involves the presentation of an action as the only actual possibility– it is the psychological sense that one must do something and that one cannot do otherwise.
- ii. The other is that this "must" characteristically involves a psychological inability to see any alternative, rather than a positive endorsement.

(iii) This raises the question of in what sense it is impossible for the agent to pursue any other alternative.

- (a) It seems true that the agent is often physically capable of taking the action ruled out by practical necessity.
- (b) Frankfurt suggests that what that agent lacks is not the capacity to do ϕ but the capacity to will ϕ .
- (c) The agent not only cares about not doing what is presently unthinkable– which prevents willing it– but also cares whether it is unthinkable.

- (d) In this respect, volitional necessity parallels Frankfurt's account of freedom of the will, which involves a second order capacity– the capacity to have the will one wants. Practical necessity involves this same capacity insofar as it stems from the ability not to have the will one doesn't want to have.
- (e) This connection with what the agent cares about explains why it is that practical necessity is not experienced as an external constraint, and is often taken by us to represent the actions that are most "ours."

2.2 *Rationality and the Unthinkable*

- (i) Let's return to the idea that an action can be unthinkable for an agent.
 - (a) The category of the unthinkable is not a rational or a moral category insofar as it does not involve the agent thinking that there are no reasons in favor of it.
 - (b) It is also distinguishable from an irresistible impulse of compulsion because whether or not the agent endorses such an impulse plays no role in its efficacy.
 - (c) Consequently, something being unthinkable involves the agent not wanting to think it and not wanting to be able to think it.
 - (d) This also involves the agent believing that there are no circumstances in which they would be willing to perform it.
- (ii) Because the unthinkable is not strictly identical with the irrational, finding something unthinkable does imply that it is not a possible outcome of agent-neutral deliberation.
- (iii) However, it gives us a reason to look for a sense of rationality that can make sense of the unthinkable.
 - (a) We can say of an unthinkable action that it is "crazy", "lunatic", or "irrational."
 - (b) This would not be possible if all we were doing was critiquing the moral character that would be a necessary prerequisite of taking the action.
 - (c) What these ascriptions amount to is the suggestion that being prepared to endorse the unthinkable in practical deliberation involves possessing a mental state that is outside the bounds of what is typical, in a normative sense, for a human being.
 - (d) There is some room here for variations in what is construed as typical across cultures and across times.

One of the last of the Fratellini family of clowns, an old man, made a television address in Paris a few years ago in which he [offered an explanation] for the dearth of good young circus clowns. "When I was a child, my father, bless him, broke my legs, so that I would walk comically, as a clown should," the old man said... "Now there are people who would take a poor view of that sort of thing."

- (e) However, it may still be true that there is nonetheless a fairly robust sense of what has everywhere been unthinkable.

§ 3 WILLIAMS

3.1 *Practical Necessity*

- (i) Like Frankfurt, Williams suggests that in deliberation we may sometimes come to the conclusion that an action is one we must do.
- (ii) This must has been represented in the Kantian case as the force of the moral law. However, a similar must can be observed in non-moral cases.
- (iii) Because of its connection with deliberation, we might suspect that this sense that something is to be done is an expression of the ought of practical rationality.
 - (a) The 'ought' of practical rationality often has a hypothetical sense– it means that we must do X if we want Y because X is the only or perhaps best means to Y.
 - (b) If we are not invested in Y, then we do not have to do X.
 - (c) It is rare for X to literally be the only means to Y, so the sense of the ought is that X is the only reasonable option.
 - (d) However, this does not seem to capture the phenomenology of the practical "must."
- (iv) In serious cases of practical necessity, the "must" in question holds not only of the means to an end but of the end itself (where this included what methods count as obtaining it).
- (v) There is a notion of impossibility involving the agent's incapacity at work here.
 - (a) There is a phenomenological difference between the sense that ϕ is to be done because all other alternatives are impossible and the direct apprehension that it is impossible to do other than ϕ
 - (b) How do these alternatives become something that cannot do? It is not that they are rejected by deliberation. The sense in which the agent is incapable of them is more literal.

- (c) Nor can it just be that the agent accepts practically that these are not live possibilities because this would just be to say that the agent ought not to take those actions.
- (d) Rather, the incapacity is a real property of the agent– here I suspect Williams’ background commitment to a causal theory of action is playing a role– that has become recognized through deliberation.
- (e) But that this incapacity is recognized does not mean that the agent actively considers and dismisses what they are incapable of doing. It can take shape negatively in the sense that what they are incapable of does not occur in deliberation at all.
- (f) Because of this connection to deliberation, it remains possible that the agent will unintentional take an action that would be unthinkable to decide upon.
- (vi) What is a conceivable option in deliberation to an agent, when the constraint on agent neutrality is dropped, is shaped by their psychological character.
- (vii) Thus, different agents may have different deliberative possibilities. Further, something is revealed to the agent about themselves when they come to recognize these boundaries through deliberation.

3.2 *Morality, The Peculiar Institution*

- (i) We can recognize a more positive sense of practical necessity as well.
 - (i) A deliberative consideration may be said to have deliberative priority if it has a high weight against other considerations.
 - (ii) A deliberative consideration may also be said to be important when it seems to us to be of great significance or value.
 - (iii) When a deliberative consideration has both the highest deliberative priority and importance, it may present itself to us as a conclusion of practical necessity directly.
 - (iv) Because deliberative priority and importance have no direct connection to morality, there is no reason to think that practical necessity is necessarily moral necessity.
- (ii) Practical necessity, nonetheless, may have moral content when morality is important to the agent.
 - (i) That this is often so in the case of moral obligation has mistakenly led theorists to the conclusion that morality has a special kind of practical authority.
 - (ii) Kantians attempt to locate this necessity in the authority of reason.

- (iii) However, there reason to be skeptical of that account and there is no reason to suppose that practical necessity must be independent of our non-rational psychology.
- (iv) Because of special features of the Kantian conception of morality, it would be undermining to think that the force of obligation comes from outside reason. However, that ceases to be the case once we abandon that account.

Once we have ceased to believe in Kant's own foundation or anything like it, we cannot read this experience in this way at all. It is the conclusion of practical necessity, no more and no less, and it seems to come "from outside" in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside—from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others. In this respect, the morality system itself, with its emphasis on the "purely moral" and personal sentiments of guilt and self-reproach, actually conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual... (p. 191)

Although we can say this, it does not seem to be connected in any secure way with the idea that he had a reason to act in that way. Perhaps he had no reason at all. In breaking the obligation, he was not necessarily behaving irrationally or unreasonably, but badly. We cannot take for granted that he had a reason to behave well, as opposed to our having various reasons for wishing that he would behave well. How do we treat him? We recognize in fact, very clumsily in the law, less clumsily in informal practice, that there are many different ways in which people can fail to be what we would ethically like them to be. At one extreme there is general deliberative incapacity. At another extreme is the sincere and capable follower of another creed. Yet again there are people with various weaknesses or vices, people who are malicious, selfish, brutal, inconsiderate, self-indulgent, lazy, greedy. All these people can be part of our ethical world. No ethical world has ever been free of those with such vices (though their classification will be a matter of the culture in question); and any individual life is lined by some of them. There are, equally, various negative reactions to them, from hatred and horror in the most extreme cases, to anger, regret, correction, blame. When we are not within the formal circumstances of the state's law, there is the further dimension of who is reacting: not everyone can or should sustain every complaint. It is another consequence of the fiction of the moral law that this truth does not occur to us. It is as if every member of the notional republic were empowered to make a citizen's arrest. (p. 192).

§ 4 APPENDIX: EXAMPLES

4.1 Luther

"Here I stand: I can do no other."

4.2 Ajax

Ajax is one whose actions raise these questions not because of their immediate intentions, but (in the term I used earlier) because of his state. Slighted by the award of Achilles' arms to Odysseus, he plans to kill the leaders of the army. To prevent this, Athene makes him mad. Thinking that he is killing Odysseus and the others, he slaughters the army's flock of sheep and cattle (and also, though Sophocles makes nothing of it, two herdsmen). Unlike Agamemnon's condition in the *Iliad*, this sickness, as it is repeatedly called, affects not his purposes, but his perceptions: in a vivid phrase, Athene is said to have "thrown misleading opinions on his eyes." He is first seen unconscious, covered in blood among the mangled beasts, and the first human reaction he elicits is in fact pity—pity for all of us, and not simply for him.

Athene is boasting:

Do you see, Odysseus, how great the gods' power is?
Who was more full of foresight than this man,
Or abler, do you think, to act with judgment?

And Odysseus replies:

None that I know of. Yet I pity him . . .
I think of him, yet also of myself; For I see the true state of all of us that live
We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.

Ajax then wakes up and shows that he has recovered his mind. There is a passionate lyric outburst of despair and, above all, shame: he has made himself, apart from anything else, utterly absurd. It becomes increasingly clear to him that he can only kill himself. He knows that he cannot change his ethos, his character, and he knows that after what he has done, this grotesque humiliation, he cannot live the only kind of life his ethos demands. In the first half of the play, which leads up to his death, he moves from a mere reaction to a deeper understanding of why this should be so, granted what he and the world are like. The unseemly arguments that occupy much of the play's second half indicate that in this, at least, he was right. Being what he is, he could not live as the man who had done these things; it would be merely impossible, in virtue of the relations between what he expects of the world and what the world expects of a man who expects that of it.

4.3 Ahab

The cabin; by the stern windows; Ahab sitting alone, and gazing out.

I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail. The envious billows sidelong swell to overwhelm my track; let them; but first I pass.

Yonder, by the ever-brimming goblet's rim, the warm waves blush like wine. The gold brow plumbs the blue. The diver sun—slow dived from noon,—goes down; my soul mounts up! she wearies with her endless hill. Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear? This Iron Crown of Lombardy. Yet is it bright with many a gem; I, the wearer, see not its far flashings; but darkly feel that I wear that, that dazzlingly confounds. 'Tis iron—that I know—not gold. 'Tis split, too—that I feel; the jagged edge galls me so, my brain seems to beat against the solid metal; aye, steel skull, mine; the sort that needs no helmet in the most brain-battering fight!

Dry heat upon my brow? Oh! time was, when as the sunrise nobly spurred me, so the sunset soothed. No more. This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy. Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise! Good night—good night! (waving his hand, he moves from the window.)

'Twas not so hard a task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve. Or, if you will, like so many ant-hills of powder, they all stand before me; and I their match. Oh, hard! that to fire others, the match itself must needs be wasting! What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye, ye cricket-players, ye pugilists, ye deaf Burkes and blinded Bendigoes! I will not say as school-boys do to bullies,—Take some one of your own size; don't pommel me! No, ye've knocked me down, and I am up again; but ye have run and hidden. Come forth from behind your cotton bags! I have no long gun to reach ye. **Come, Ahab's compliments to ye; come and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!**

4.4 Lord Fawn

In Chapter 59 of *The Eustace Diamonds*, Anthony Trollope describes a man who cannot bring himself to carry out a course of conduct on which he has freely and deliberately resolved. Lord Fawn is a high government official and a power of the

realm. He has invited Andy Gowan, a low-born and cultivated estate-steward, to give him an eyewitness account of an incident in which Fawn's finance was reported to have embraced another man. Now Gowan, in the course of giving the account, winks at Fawn. Thereupon, Fawn finds out it impossible to continue the interview:

Out was dreadful to Lord Fawn that the man should win his eye at him. He did not quite understand what Andy had last said, but he did understand that some accusation as to familiarity with her cousin was intended to be brought by the Scotch steward against the woman to whom he has engaged himself. Every feeling of his nature revolted against the task before him, and he found that on trial it became absolutely impracticable. He could not bring himself to inquire minutely as to our Lizzie's flirting down among the rocks. He was weak, and foolish, and in many respects ignorant, but he was a gentleman. as he got nearer to the point which it had been intended that he should reach, the more he hated Andy Gowan, and the more he hated himself for having submitted to such contact. He paused a moment, and then he decided that the conversation was at an end.

For Lord Fawn, it is unthinkable to share a matter of such intimate concern with a person so inferior to himself in breeding and class. He had thought that it would be a good idea to discover from Gowan just what Lizzie Eustace had been up to with Frank Greystock, and he had made up his mind to do that. But in the event, "every feeling of his nature revolted." He found that he simply could not do it.