

KINDS OF PRACTICAL REASONS: ATTITUDE-RELATED REASONS AND EXCLUSIONARY REASONS

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Abstract

I start by explaining what attitude-related reasons are and why it is plausible to assume that, at least in the domain of practical reason, there are such reasons. Then I turn to Raz's idea that the practice of practical reasoning commits us to what he calls exclusionary reasons. Being excluded would be a third way, additional to being outweighed and being undermined, in which a reason can be defeated. I try to show that attitude-related reasons can explain the phenomena Raz appeals to equally well. Attitude-related reasons, however, are weighted against other reasons and, thus, don't determine a third relation of defeat. On this basis, I voice some doubts about Raz's conception of exclusionary reasons.

Keywords

Practical reason, exclusionary reason, attitude-related reason, defeating reasons.

1. Attitude-Related Reasons

Although the conceptual distinction between attitude-related and content-related reasons holds for all attitudes, I will focus exclusively on practical reasons, i.e. on reasons for wanting something, intending to do something, and doing something (insofar as reasons for actions can be explained in terms of reasons for intentions or other attitudes). Take the attitude of wanting to do something, where what one wants to do I call the content of this attitude. A reason for wanting to do something might either be grounded in some feature of what one wants to do or it might be grounded in some feature of one's wanting to do it. I might want to eat an apple because doing so is healthy. Then my reason for wanting to eat an apple is a content-related reason. It mentions a feature of my eating an apple, namely its being healthy, which gives me a reason to eat an apple. If I want to eat an apple because, for some reason, I want to want to eat an apple, then my reason for wanting to eat an apple is an attitude-related reason. This reason mentions a feature of my wanting to eat an apple, namely that it is itself something that I want. More precisely, something is a content-related reason for an attitude if I can specify this feature without having to mention the attitude it is a reason for. I can refer to the health benefit of eating

an apple without mentioning my wanting to eat an apple, whereas I cannot refer to the fact that I want to eat an apple without mentioning the very attitude, wanting to eat an apple, for which the feature of being wanted by me is a reason.

Amartya Sen gives the following example, which illustrates the explanatory role of attitude-related reasons. It is a story about two boys who find two apples, one large, one small. 'Boy A [whom we also might call Nice] tells boy B [whom we also might call Nasty], 'You choose'. B immediately picks the larger apple. A is upset and permits himself to remark that this was grossly unfair. 'Why?' asks B. 'Which one would you have chosen, if you were to choose rather than me?' 'The smaller one, of course,' A replies. B is now triumphant: 'Then what are you complaining about? That's the one you've got!' (Sen, 1977, 328).

How can the nice boy A complain about getting what he himself would have chosen? His preference regarding the apples is not only informed by their size, he also cares about features of this very preference. If he preferred the bigger apple, he would prefer what is better, but to prefer the bigger apple would also mean to be impolite. Being nice, the impoliteness of a preference for the big apple is more important to him than the difference in size. Politeness is not a feature of what is preferred, i.e. it is not a content-related reason; it rather is a feature of the preference itself and, thus, an attitude-related reason to prefer the small apple. In the circumstances of our example, this reason only comes into play, if it is up to the nice boy to make the choice. Receiving the small apple, as opposed to taking it, is, arguably, neither polite nor impolite. The attitude-related reason, thus understood, explains why the nice boy would choose the small apple, despite being unhappy about receiving it. The nice boy would choose the small apple, because, in a context of choice, he prefers the small apple, as such a preference has the desirable feature of marking him as polite. He is, however, unhappy about receiving the small apple, because, politeness playing no role, he would prefer the bigger apple. There is a general lesson to be drawn: Not always ought one to prefer what is best; one ought to prefer what is such that preferring it is best.¹

Attitude-related reasons, like other reasons, are reasons for having certain attitudes. They differ from other reasons in their ground: we ought to have certain attitudes because of their features. What are plausible candidates of an attitude's features which provide an agent with a reason to have this attitude? The attitudes we have determine to a good extent what sort of person we are. We could not describe our character without mentioning what we care about or what we aim for. Features of attitudes that essentially relate to who we are will be prime candidates for providing us with reasons. For example: One reason for wanting one's friends to be well is that one wants to be the sort of person who cares for one's friends. This reason, though self-centred, doesn't undermine the non-instrumental character of one's concerns for one's friends. According to David Lewis (1989), to value something is to desire to desire it. If this is correct, we have, whenever we value something, an attitude-related reason for wanting what we want, namely that so wanting is itself wanted. Amartya Sen expresses a similar view, when he argues that one's moral commitments are best expressed as second-order preferences (Sen 1974, 62).

Attitude-related reasons are by no means restricted to second-order desires. Wanting to do something might simply be kind or thoughtful, and properties like these will ground attitude-related reasons. If wanting to help her is itself kind and kindness is reason giving, one's appreciation of this reason might well be reflected in one's wanting to want to help her. Thus, even when second-order desires are not themselves a source of reason, they will occur as an agent's response to the attitude-related reasons there are.

¹ Different theories of practical reason will differ in their criterion of choice, i.e. in their account of what makes something best. The acceptance of attitude-related reasons is independent of any particular account of the nature of practical reasons.

Any theory of practical reason will identify certain properties as reason providing. Suppose being useful or being kind is such a property. It would be a surprise if these properties only provide reasons when they are properties of the content of an attitude but not when they are properties of the attitude itself. Suppose my reason for wanting it to rain is the rain's usefulness for my purposes. If, in some situation, my wanting it to rain would also be useful for me – it makes me being seen as a normal member of my community – it would similarly be a reason to want it to rain. As the normative force of a property shouldn't vary with whatever has it, it is plausible to assume that there are attitude-related reasons.²

2. Exclusionary reasons

The category of attitude-related reasons does not have many friends. Attacks on the very idea of an attitude-related reason are more common than sympathetic treatments³. In his book 'Practical Reason and Norms' Joseph Raz also wants to extend the common conceptual repertoire of theories of practical reasons. He introduces the category of exclusionary reasons. Whereas attitude-related reasons are distinguished by their ground, exclusionary reasons are distinguished by their normative role: they exclude other reasons from playing their normal role in determining what ought to be done. Excluding a reason is a way of defeating it. In order to explain Raz's concept of an excluded reason, I will first contrast it with two more common cases in which one reason defeats another.

First, one reason can be stronger than another. In such a case, one reason outweighs the other. For example: My own safety might be a stronger reason for me than a promise. Thus, I don't engage in some dangerous activity even though my promise to join them in whatever they do is a reason, a weaker reason, for doing so. Secondly, a reason can be defeated by some consideration, which itself need not be a reason for or against doing anything, by being cancelled or undermined. For example: Although I have promised the robber not to call the police, the special circumstances in which I have made the promise render it void. Once the cancelling condition obtains, what in other circumstances is a reason is drained of its normative force. It plays no role in practical deliberation anymore, because the conjunctive state, reason and cancelling condition, is no reason at all. The difference between outweighing and cancelling is that an outweighed reason, but not a cancelled one, retains its normative force.

Exclusion differs both from outweighing and from undermining. What it shares with outweighing is that an excluded reason remains its normative force; what it shares with undermining is that an excluded reason doesn't play any role in determining what one ought to do. This looks like an odd combination of features, as we have to find a normative role for excluded reasons, which does not consist in the reason's contribution to the determination of what one ought to do.

Exclusionary reasons are reasons of a higher level. Raz calls them second-order reasons: 'A second-order reason is any reason to act or to refrain from acting for a reason. An exclusionary reason is a second-order reason to refrain from acting for some reason.' (Raz, 1990, 39)

Raz argues for exclusionary reasons by analysing three examples of practical deliberation. In the first example an agent refuses to accept a complex financial offer, not because the offer doesn't merit acceptance – the agent has no view on the matter – but because the agent is too tired to think it through. The agent's refusal to accept the offer is not based on facts that would show the offer not to be advantageous. It is based on a reason not to consider the merits of the offer. Being too tired the agent could not trust her judgment and, thus, refuses to seriously think about the matter. In this situation tiredness, Raz claims, is a reason not to act on what he calls first-order

² For a more detailed argument why, at least in the practical realm, we should accept attitude-related reasons see Pillar (forthcoming).

³ See for example Gibbard (1991, 39) and Parfit(2001).

reasons, which in our example are those which are relevant to the merit of the offer. Take for example the fact that the same option has been accepted by a person the agent knows to be in very similar financial circumstances and also being alike in her degree of caution when it comes to investment. This fact is a reason to accept the offer. The agent's tiredness neither outweighs nor undermines it: it retains its normative force. Nevertheless the agent's tiredness is, according to Raz, a reason not to act on this reason.

The agent's reasoning, however, can also be explained in terms of attitude-related reasons. The agent doesn't want to decide such matters on the basis of attitudes which are affected by her tiredness. The precise nature of the attitude in question won't matter too much. If the agent decided to accept, she would, presumably, be in a state of wanting to accept it. Similarly, if she decided to reject it, she would be in a state of wanting to reject it. The agent wants, for good reason, to make important financial decision in a way such that these attitudes, wanting to accept it or wanting to reject it, are the result of proper and careful consideration of all the relevant matters. This is an attitude related reason as she wants her wanting to accept or to reject the offer to have the feature of being the result of careful deliberation. Being tired, the agent realizes that she won't be able to acquire an attitude that satisfies this demand. The tie between accepting and rejecting the offer is broken because, in the circumstances of the example, the attitude of neither wanting to accept it nor wanting to reject it, which is indicated by the agent's attitude-related reasons, simply amounts to a rejection of the offer.

Raz's second example goes as follows: 'While serving in the army Jeremy is ordered by his commanding officer to appropriate and use a van belonging to a certain tradesman. Therefore he has reason to appropriate the van. His friend urges him to disobey the order pointing to weighty reasons for doing so. Jeremy does not deny that his friend may have a case. But, he claims, it does not matter whether he is right or not. Orders are orders and should be obeyed even if wrong, even if no harm will come from disobeying them. That is what it means to be a subordinate' (Raz 1990, 38).

The order is an exclusionary reason; it excludes the reasons, which would make it wrong to appropriate the van. The fact that Jeremy has been ordered to appropriate the van doesn't simply add another consideration that goes into the balance of reasons and tips it one way. Having been ordered to do something doesn't simply outweigh other reasons: If Raz is right, it excludes them from playing a role in determining what Jeremy ought to do.

Again, it seems as if attitude-related reason can capture Jeremy's reasoning equally well. Jeremy wants to be a good soldier, i.e. he wants to make the aims set by orders his own. Thus understood, the desire to be a good soldier is a desire to have (or to be moved by) certain desires.⁴ For Jeremy wanting to appropriate the van has a desirable feature: it is to want in the way he wants to want. This feature is an attitude-related reason for wanting to appropriate the van.⁵

In general it should not come as a surprise that attitude-related reasons can explain the phenomena Raz appeals to in his examples. Remember that an exclusionary reason is a reason not to act for a specific reason. Following an exclusionary reason is a matter of being motivated in one's

⁴ The same view of the good soldier can be found in Jeffrey (1966, 381): '... the good soldier acts freely, in accordance with first-order preferences he has freely adopted in accordance with a second-order preference for adopting certain first-order preferences on command'.

⁵ The third example goes as follows: '... consider the case of Colin who promised his wife that in all decisions affecting the education of his son he will act only for his son's interest and disregard all other reasons' (Raz 1990, 39). In this example the exclusion of other reasons is itself the object of a promise. Thus, as long as promising is a sufficiently strong reason, other reasons will be excluded. Such an exclusion need not be explained by the claim that promising is itself an exclusionary reason. As long as the reason giving force of promising prevails, i.e. as long as it outweighs reasons to the contrary, other reasons will be excluded simply because this is what has been promised. Although Raz does think that promises are exclusionary reasons, I will for the reason mentioned put this example aside.

action in a certain way (namely to do it in any way but for the excluded reason). This must be reflected in one's attitudes. But the features of Raz's examples, the agents being tired or having been ordered to do something, are features which do not engage with the merits of what the relevant attitude is about. Thus, they must be understandable as attitude-related reasons.

3. A Comparison

The distinctive feature of attitude-related reasons is that they are grounded in features of attitudes. Exclusionary reasons, in contrast, are distinguished by their normative role. This leaves open the possibility that attitude-related reasons could play the role of exclusionary reasons. Above I have argued that the examples by which Raz illustrates how exclusionary reasons work can also be captured by employing the concept of an attitude-related reason. Nevertheless, as I will explain in this section, the normative role of attitude-related reasons is rather different from that of exclusionary reasons.

The agent's tiredness excluded to act on the (vaguely) perceived merit of the offer. It was not weighed against it. This makes exclusion different from outweighing. In order to give substance to the claim that exclusion is different from undermining, we have to look at the role of excluded reasons. Undermined reasons, as we know, are drained of all normative force, but excluded reasons, though somehow bracketed, are still normatively relevant. Raz says, 'The presence of an exclusionary reason may imply that one ought not to act on the balance of reasons' (Raz 1990, 41). The excluded reason, in contrast to an undermined reason, is still a reason. It does not, however, determine what one ought to do. What, then, is its normative role?

'When the application of an exclusionary reason leads to the result that one should not act on the balance of reasons [...] we are faced with two incompatible assessments of what ought to be done' (Raz 1990, 41). The first way of assessing the situation excludes the excluded reason, which otherwise would have tipped the balance. The second way looks at the situation as if the excluded reason counted, thus failing to conform to the exclusionary reason. These two assessments are not on a par: when an excluded reason tips the balance we ought not to act on the balance of reasons. Raz is unambiguous about this point: 'The peculiarity of the situations we are concerned with is that we are aware that the action can be assessed in two ways that lead to contradictory results. It is not that we are uncertain which assessment should prevail. It is rather that since the two assessments are on different levels we are not always quite happy to say merely that the subordinate one has been outweighed and that this is the end of the matter' (Raz, 1990, 43).

Let me compare this characterisation of the role of excluded reasons with an account of the phenomena in terms of attitude-related reasons. Taking the small apple is polite, but it is also taking what is worse. The difference between content-related and attitude-related reasons allows us to take two different perspectives on the agent's choice: one is determined by the value of the object chosen, the other by the value of choosing it. The fact that one choice is polite doesn't undermine the reasons that speak in favour of the opposite choice. But there is a crucial difference to exclusionary reasons: attitude-related reasons need to be weighed against content-related reasons. If, for example, the small apple has been treated with some chemical agent I, but not my host, is allergic against, then considerations of politeness will be overruled by considerations regarding the value, or rather disvalue, of the object chosen. Talk about attitude-related reasons can catch some elements of the two-perspective account Raz gives for exclusionary reasons, but attitude-related reasons don't introduce exclusion as a third way in which one reason can defeat another.

4. Are there Exclusionary Reasons?

Raz appealed to the practice of practical reasoning when he introduced exclusionary reasons. Attitude-related reasons, I tried to show, explain what is going on in these examples equally well.

The difference between these two explanations is that attitude-related reasons, if strong enough, outweigh content-related reasons, whereas exclusionary reasons exclude them. In order to argue for exclusionary reasons, Raz has to find some normative role for them – otherwise excluding would be the same as undermining – and this normative role has to be different from the role played by reasons which have been outweighed. So far, Raz has pointed to the determination of a somewhat shadowy ought when he explains, in his two-perspective account, the normative role of excluded reasons. It is a shadowy ought because it does not tell us what one really ought to do; it only gives rise to a secondary evaluation of the situation.

Raz might complain that if attitude-related reasons outweigh others, then they simply cannot capture what is going on in his examples. Jeremy, the soldier, would misunderstand the nature of authority, Raz would claim, if he took the fact that he has been ordered to do something as just one reason among others.

It certainly would be implausible to portray the good soldier as someone who took orders as sufficient reasons to do whatever it is he has been ordered to do. Raz agrees: '[Jeremy] admits that if he were ordered to commit an atrocity he should refuse. But this is an ordinary case, he thinks, and the order should prevail' (Raz 1990, 38). In ordinary cases, Raz tells us, orders prevail. But how should one find out whether a case is ordinary or not? In ordinary cases having been ordered is an exclusionary reason, in others not. If Jeremy is ordered to commit an atrocity, he has very strong reasons not to obey the order. But if it is a matter of the strength of reasons whether having been ordered to do something is an exclusionary reason or not, weighing reasons is again in the picture and the difference between outweighing and excluding seems minimal⁶. Raz rightly points out that it is compatible with the idea of exclusionary reasons '... that they exclude only reasons of certain importance' (Raz 1990, 215). In order to find out, whether the order is important enough to override the negative effects of carrying it out, one has to weigh it against these effects. This is true on both accounts. The remaining difference is that, if it is seen as important enough, the reasons to the contrary are excluded or bracketed on Raz's account, but outweighed on the account that uses attitude-related reasons.⁷

Let us have a closer look at this remaining difference. For Raz, outweighing doesn't leave a reminder – the stronger reason wins unequivocally – whereas we react differently if the balance of reasons points one way, but we ought to act differently because a decisive reason has been excluded: 'This leads normally to a peculiar feeling of unease, which will show itself when we wish to censure a person who acted on the balance of reasons for disregarding the exclusionary reason and when we have to justify someone's acting on an exclusionary reason against claims that the person should have acted on the balance of reasons' (Raz 1990, 41).

I think we can find this feeling of unease in any difficult situation that can be judged from two evaluative perspectives. If loyalty demands one thing but justice another, we might wish to censure the loyal person for disregarding justice and the just person for being disloyal. Conflicting

⁶ A similar point is raised by Gans (1986, 385): 'How do we know whether these reasons are excluded by the rule and therefore that the rule ought to be followed, or whether they are not excluded by it and therefore the rule ought not to be followed? Do we have for every rule, a list of reasons which may be violated by it (i.e. excluded by it) and a list of reasons which may not be violated by it? How do we prepare these lists? Raz does not answer these crucial questions.'

⁷ For Raz it is a matter of the structure of reasons that exclusionary reasons always win; it is their being about some other reasons that gives them authority. Attitude-related reasons don't always win. Above I pointed out that Raz can only defend his claim by including restriction on the scope of exclusionary reasons that, intuitively, are a matter of strength and, thus, a matter of weighing reasons. In the framework of attitude-related reasons we find a similar authority once the agent has adopted a second-order desire. (But whether he is correct in adopting such an attitude is a matter of weighing reasons.) Second-order desires have the same, purely structural, authority over first-order desires which Raz claims for exclusionary reasons.

reasons, when they both stem from important commitments, can give rise to unease in judging a person without them being on different levels.⁸ On the other hand some of the examples in which excluded reasons play a role are solved easily and without a reminder: a person who accepts the rules of etiquette will easily forgo the big apple and take the small one. In general, reasons which have been outweighed remain reasons and so, if their normative force is strong enough, one can feel uneasy about doing what is indicated by one's strongest reasons, because of the strength of the reasons that point to a contrary action.

In 'Rethinking Exclusionary Reason', the Postscript to Raz (1990), Raz determines the normative role of excluded reasons as follows: 'They are reasons for performing certain actions, and, other things being equal, the fact that they are excluded by an exclusionary reason merely means that they should not be complied with, not that they should not be conformed to. The best course is if they are indirectly obeyed, i.e. if the action they indicate is performed for some other, independent, reason' (Raz 1990, 185). Conflicts between attitude-related and content-related reasons exhibit a similar feature. As a polite person, you have to forgo the higher quality indicated by the size of the big apple. But suppose, the smaller apple, unbeknownst to both agents, is of higher quality. Then you have been lucky and can have it both ways: you have been polite and you have got the better apple. In fact, what is true for the conflict between attitude-related and content-related reasons is true for all conflicts of reasons. You think that justice outweighs loyalty and do what is just, but if it turns out that the just act was not disloyal after all, you simply had a wrong belief about the matter, it is all for the better. Again, it is doubtful whether the normative role Raz assigns to excluded reasons really separates them from reasons that have been outweighed.

I think there are attitude-related reasons. Raz's examples would support this claim if the two perspectives that attitude-related and content-related reasons bring with them are sufficient to explain the agent's reasoning in these examples. The matter turns on whether we can nevertheless understand such reasoning as a process of weighing two different kinds of reasons. I have argued that such a view is plausible. If this is correct, we have found no normative role for excluded reasons that would distinguish them from outweighed reasons. Consequently, we would have to doubt whether there are exclusionary reasons.

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⁸ See, for example, Pettit (1996), who offers an explanation for a feeling of regret even though one has acted on one's strongest reason.

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